

THE UNDERSIDE OF BOARDING HOUSE LIFE

CENTRE FOR NEWFOUNDLAND STUDIES

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The Underside of Boarding House Life

by

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Abstract

Some of the poorest people in St. John's live in illegally operated boarding houses. These people include alcoholics, drug-addicts, ex-offenders, mentally and physical handicapped, old age pensioners, and structurally unemployed people. Most are single, unemployed, and lacking in close family and friendship ties in the city. Almost all rely on some form of state support for their maintenance, and this support is often inadequate in meeting their day to day needs. This thesis describes life in the low income boarding house, and provides an analysis of the social milieu of the boarders: their relations with each other, with the wider society, and the institution with which they interact.

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Contents

Chapter

Abstract.....	ii.
Acknowledgements.....	iii
one <u>Illegally Operated Boarding Houses</u>	1
two <u>Setting: Down the Street</u>	14
three <u>Setting: In the House</u>	26
four <u>Morning, Noon, and Night</u>	40
five <u>Boarders and Boarders</u>	61
six <u>Boarders and Institutions</u>	76
seven <u>Conclusion</u>	87
<u>References</u>	100

## Chapter 1

### Illegally Operated Boarding Houses

Brazil Square, a street located in the lower west end of St. John's, has traditionally been associated with boarding houses (Sparkes, 1969:1). They were considered places where visitors to the city could find inexpensive and reasonably clean accommodations. But in January and February of 1984 the general public was made aware that many boarding houses were below a reasonable living standard and that such houses were not only in the lower west side but scattered throughout the city. Unmarried mothers, alcoholics, ex-psychiatric patients and unemployed people were living two or three to a room, ten to twenty to a house. They were underfed, underclothed, and living in filth. There were cracked windows, leaky roofs and furnaces that did not work.

The conditions in the boarding houses were first documented on a local television news program "Here & Now". The public was informed of a vicious circle which encompassed boarders, landlords, the Department of Social Services, and City Hall. Many of the boarding houses were run by people whose only source of income was the money they collected from the boarders. The majority of the boarders in turn were dependent upon the Department of Social Services, which provided just over two hundred dollars a month for each individual's room and board.

The St. John's City Council required that houses with more than four boarders be licensed and meet certain conditions of operation. For example, city regulations demand that the houses have walls with five-eighths inch, fire resistant gypsum board, a fire alarm system, smoke detectors, a second exit on each floor with lighted exit sign, fire doors on all bedrooms, emergency lighting, and fire extinguishers in the furnace room, kitchen and one on each floor.<sup>1</sup> The lodging house by-law also requires that the house provide 75 square feet per person. (Wall, 1984:8)

Meeting these regulations would require a sizable capital investment. The regulations were also subject to changes at any time that would require further expenditures by boarding house operators.

A boarding house proprietor could keep up to four boarders and not be governed by the boarding house by-laws. At \$200 a month per boarder this would mean a gross income of around \$800, out of which would have to come food, heat and light, rent or a mortgage, plus other assorted costs.<sup>2</sup> Even if boarders could be found who would pay as much as \$400 a month, which is highly unlikely, the proprietor would make very little profit. In general then, people who kept fewer than four boarders were not dependent solely on those boarders for income, and people who

<sup>1</sup> Cathy White. A television documentary on boarding houses in St. John's, Part 1. First shown on the local C.B.C newscast "Here & Now", January 1984.

<sup>2</sup> In January 1984, \$200 was a common charge for room and board in the city. This amount could vary from house to house.

were dependent upon the boarders for income were forced to keep more than four boarders. But if they kept more than four boarders they had to abide by the lodging house by-laws, something many could not afford to do. As a result many boarding house operators did not obtain licenses but chose instead to operate illegally. This resulted in a game of hide and seek with the boarding house operators always wary of city inspectors.

The inspectors first problem was to find an illegal house. This was not always an easy matter. One might think that all an inspector would have to do would be to ask the Department of Social Services where their clients are boarding. However, the Department of Social Services considers the information confidential. The inspectors usually relied upon the general public for information leading to the location of an illegal boarding house, but the public rarely knows if a house is legal or illegal and usually cares even less. Even if an illegal boarding house were found, the inspectors are required to give forty-eight hours notice before an inspection. By the time the inspector arrived on the scene, the operator had usually evicted the number of boarders necessary to reach the allowable limit of four or had shifted them to another house he or she might own or operate. City inspectors have managed to inspect and close some houses, but this has led to a different problem. The substandard, crowded houses are all that many boarders and boarding house operators can afford. Poor housing attracts poor people simply because it is cheaper. By limiting the amount of poor housing the city limits the number of places a poor person can go and a

poor person can, and often does, end up on the street.

At the time of writing, in February of 1985, this problem has been exacerbated by the speculation brought on by offshore oil development. Many owners, faced with stable rents as set by the Department of Social Services, rising cost of operations, constantly changing city by-laws, and attention from the city inspectors, have found it much more profitable to sell. Brazil Square, a street once lined on both sides with two and three story boarding houses, has disappeared. A large convention center will soon take its place. This type of development increases the pressure on other boarding houses, compounding the problem of overcrowding with more violations.

For the week or two after the television reports in 1984 the public was subjected to what could only be described as an evasive analysis. Tom Hickey, the Minister of Social Services, was quoted as saying

Well I guess I have to acknowledge that my department does have some responsibility here, along with that of the city and I think that we have to come to grips with that, something has to be done. It's not as easy problem to settle and it's going to require a great deal of effort between both the city and ourselves. But I think we're up to it and that we're on to it.<sup>3</sup>

Shannie Duff, deputy Mayor of the city, when asked if she had any solutions to the problems, replied:

Well first of all, Cathy, I would like to say that I think that your program (referring to the reporter who broke the boarding house story) last night was very

<sup>3</sup> Cathy White. A Television documentary on boarding houses in St. John's. Part 2. First shown on the local C.B.C. newscast "Here & Now". January 1984.



good and that you have struck on a very important problem in the city of St. John's which needs to be addressed.<sup>4</sup>

Mrs. Duff then went on to describe how difficult it was to inspect unlicensed boarding houses. The main problem, she said, was how to locate them. But despite the problems in identifying these houses Mrs. Duff assured citizens that the city was doing all that it could, and indeed had already managed to close some eight or nine houses that year. It appears that Mrs. Duff's solution would be to close down the boarding houses.

The most dramatic moment of the boarding house controversy came with the release of a report by the Community Services Council. Marie Hedderson, one of their information officers, in an attempt to obtain some first hand information about life in a boarding house, decided to live in one. The house she lived in was one of a three-house operation. She reported that there were a total of sixty-five boarders in the houses, thirty each in two of them and five in the other. The houses were not licensed, so the operation was illegal. Besides the overcrowding, Hedderson described a situation where people lived in filth and were underfed. As she put it;

None of the houses ever appeared to be cleaned and there was a foul smell in them, particularly the house we ate at. The odors of cooking and dirty bodies mingled to create a very obnoxious atmosphere, particularly at mealtime....Because of these conditions it was difficult to eat the food, which was mostly overcooked and poor tasting anyway. But servings were always small and you were always hungry so it was necessary to eat it....Cleanliness was something alien to life in this boarding house. There were no cleaning agencies.

<sup>4</sup> IBID.

The bathrooms in the house where I stayed were filthy. It looked as though it hadn't been cleaned in years, and there was nothing nothing around to clean it with (Hedderson, 1984:3-6).

The report enraged citizens, the boarding house mistress, and Tom Hickey alike. The local hotline shows were deluged with calls condemning the government for allowing such a situation to exist. One caller suggested that Marie Hedderson be named Citizen of the Year for covering the story, and bringing it to public attention. The landlady and Mr Hickey were, however, not at all pleased by the report. The landlady denied it, saying,

I have only four boarders. Sixty boarders is out of the question. The woman was telling lies, there was lots of heat. And the girl was also lying about the dirty bed.<sup>5</sup>

Hickey condemned Hedderson for using "CIA tactics", and condemned the report, because it was written with information obtained under false pretenses. He said he would ignore Hedderson's account and the Community Services Council because he could not really be sure whether or not the information was correct. Hickey's handling of the situation was to become an embarrassment, not only for himself, but for the whole Department of Social Services. A few days later an internal document was released to the press, and even though there was an attempt to keep its contents from public attention, bits and pieces made their way into the local papers. In effect, the report confirmed the findings of Hedderson's research. Overcrowding, unsanitary conditions, poor meals did exist in many of St. John's boarding

<sup>5</sup> Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. News coverage of Marie Hedderson's Press Release. (St. John's: February 1, 1984).

houses. But the internal report went a step further, saying that the problem was within the Department.

If not legally, then morally, does not the Department of Social Services have responsibility to see that all humans live decently and maintain human dignity? If, indeed, we accept the moral responsibility, then much has to be done to correct the gross indignities suffered by many of our clients (Evening Telegram, February 3, 1984).

Hickey was outraged. He condemned the unknown person who leaked the report as well as the media for making parts of it public. He maintained that it was an internal working document and that its publication made it difficult to address the issue. The police were called and an investigation was conducted to discover who had leaked the report to the media.

Essentially, three things came out of all this publicity. First, boarding house operators, fearing a crackdown, evicted many of the boarders, and because of increased inspection many operators were forced to close. The second result was the establishment of the Supportive Housing Action Committee. Finally, the boarding house crisis created a myth that the housing problem had, at last, come to the attention of the general public and government services and something would now be done about it.

The evictions and closures forced many boarders into the street. A few, with nowhere else to go, broke into vacant houses in the west end, and, because they had no money or food, stole what they needed. Some of these people were caught and charged for their offenses. Most of the evicted boarders were placed into local hotels by the Department of Social Services.

Regardless of the route the evicted boarders took, the pressure on them was great. Many did not know where they would be or what they would be doing from one day to the next. One particular hotel used as an emergency shelter was located on the outskirts of the city. As the social networks and activities of the boarders are usually located in the downtown area, those who were sent to the outlying hotel found themselves isolated, without support or the means to get back to the city. According to one fieldworker with the Canadian Mental Health Association, it was this type of pressure which caused one of her clients to try to commit suicide.<sup>6</sup>

The Supportive Housing Action Committee was made up for the most part by social workers, community agencies and church representatives, was later subdivided into three organizations. One group called itself the Community Support Services Committee, a second the Alternative Housing Committee, while a third called itself the Hostel Program Committee.<sup>7</sup> The first committee noted that many of the boarders lacked the basic skills which would enable them to participate in community activities. This they concluded resulted in feelings of isolation and low self-esteem. To overcome this the committee suggested the establishment of a supervised living system where boarders, with the help of gui-

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<sup>6</sup> Personal Communication.

<sup>7</sup> The Rev. Bruce Gregerson, Mona Wall, of the Catholic Social Action Committee, and Penelope Rowe, of the Community Services Council, each chaired the respective committees; Together they made-up the Supportive Housing Committee.

dance counsellors, would be able to integrate themselves into the community. This committee also recommended that social support services be instituted, such as a twenty-four hour crisis line service and training programs for boarding house operators.

The Alternative Housing Committee set out to examine different options for housing the residents in question. Recognizing that there was a wide range of needs to be addressed, the committee tried to match the housing options with various individual needs. Four recommendations were made. First, that a financial assistance program be established which would allow boarding house operators to upgrade their houses to city standards. Second, that the Department of Social Services increase the amount allowed for rent to \$300 per month. Third, that special-care homes be established with rent allocations of \$630 per month. Finally, that a supervised apartment program be established under which individuals could share rental accommodation. This program seems to be very similar to the first committee's supervised living program.

The Hostel Committee set out to examine the need for a hostel in St. John's, and investigate who it might service. They determined that a hostel would serve a number of different groups, including persons who are living on the street with alcohol or drug related problems, people who are forced to leave their homes because of family violence, and native people who are visiting from other parts of the province. The committee suggested that there were about fifty individuals at any given time

in need of hostel services, but, for reasons that are not clear, they recommended that a hostel with minimum accommodation for thirty be established.

It was the investigative reporting by a CBC reporter, some insightful newspaper articles and undercover work by an information officer for the Community Services Council, that created the myth that the problem had finally been made known and something would now be done about it. In fact, however, many people had known about the boarding house problem for years. Certainly the Government of Newfoundland and other bureaucrats had prior knowledge of the problem, as these statements in reports of the Department of Public Welfare indicated,

Up to a few years ago all such homes (boarding homes) were located in St. John's, there was serious overcrowding in all and existing facilities fell far short of what was desired. The destruction of one of these homes with severe loss of life...brought these facts to the forefront(Government of Newfoundland,1951:16).

Sub-standard housing is still plaguing many of our clients and we are hard-pressed in finding a solution to the problem. Inadequate housing is probably the greatest evil of our time and is a contributing cause of poor health, disease, crime, delinquency and lessening of moral(sic)(Government of Newfoundland,1967:168).

And by the 1970's the district officers for St. John's could only comment that the problem "is still with us and the situation is worsening instead of showing improvement"(Government of Newfoundland, 1970:163).

In fact many people have knowledge of the bad living conditions in some of the boarding houses in St. John's. Certainly the boarders knew, as well as many relatives, friends, ex-friends

and neighbors. And most people in St. John's had some knowledge of the residents who lived there. The general population sometimes refers to them as bums, drunks, or low-life.

Few changes resulted from the flurry of publicity. The maximum rent allowed by Social Services for this group of people was raised to \$300 per month. However because of the crackdown by inspectors, operators have had to limit the number of boarders and thus reduce total incomes. There is little money for home improvement and bad living conditions still exist. With rising rents, food prices and utility bills the increase in rent allowance has in many cases not been transferred to the boarders in the form of better living conditions. The Government has also tried to implement the suggested supervised apartment scheme, but at the time of writing the program includes only ten boarders. Most remain in the same boarding houses as before or have found temporary shelter in a local hotel.

Nor have our perceptions of the boarding house residents changed. True, the reports prepared by the Supportive Housing Committee and the Community Services Council have informed us that many residents are incapable of integrating themselves into society, that certain individuals have special needs, or lack basic life skills. But such statements tell us little about the day to day lives of boarders. We know practically nothing about the people themselves. They are still shunned, forgotten or ignored by the general population. This thesis is an attempt to come to a better understanding of who these people are. I

proceed by exploring the following empirical questions.

- A) Who exactly are the boarders and how do they come to be there?
- B) What are the social and economic relationships which constitute their lives?
- C) How do these social and economic relationships articulate with the wider society?

The bulk of information for this study was gathered by the method of participant observation. I selected a boarding house in the downtown area and lived there for a period of four months, integrating myself as much as possible into the social environment. A house with a large cross section of people was chosen which included, among others, alcoholics, drug users, ex-offenders, unemployed people, and old-age pensioners. The role of participant observer was defined in large part by my ability, and inability, to converse with members of the group. Most boarders accepted me into their environment and were very helpful. Some were, of course, more helpful than others, but a boarder rarely refused information when asked. Research was conducted only after boarders had given their consent, having, of course, knowledge of why I was there.

It is important for the reader to note that this study is in large part a case study, and the structure of one boarding house can differ from another. However, all of the boarders in the house under study have stayed in a number of different boarding houses at one time or another, and I have talked to boarders from other houses. Generalization made throughout the thesis are based upon their knowledge of boarding house life.



I have also explored certain dimensions of boarding house life with social workers, community service agencies, and representatives of the church. Information was also obtained from boarding home operators. Interviewing was conducted formally - with closed ended set questions and a tape recorder - as well as informally.

The thesis is divided into five sections. Chapters two and three explore certain dimensions of life on the street and in the home. This is an attempt to outline the physical condition of boarding house life. Chapter four is a general overview of day to day activities. Here, I attempt to point out some of the major differences and similarities which exist among the boarders. Chapter five examines the relationships boarders develop among themselves and how these relationships draw the group together. Chapter six explores the relationships between boarders and the various institutions they come into contact with, with special attention on the economic relation. Finally, I try to tie together the preceding four sections in an attempt to understand the articulation between the class realities of boarding house life and the wider ideological structure, as expounded by the institutions that touch their lives.

## Chapter 2

### Setting: Down on the Street.

The west and central areas of George Street are lined with empty warehouses whose windows have given way to the target practice of kids playing in the street, a taxi stand, an abandoned house or two, furniture and office supply stores, two scrap metal depots, the back side of a church, a bus stop, gas station, a blacksmith and welding shop, and the backs of the stores which face onto Water and Gower streets. At night it is reminiscent of one of the narrow, dirty streets of a Dickens novel or a Sherlock Holmes film.

The east-end of George Street is also dirty and ragged, looking but the feel of it is different. Here you can find a number of chic bars and pubs where a bottle of beer can cost as much as \$2.50 and a drink even more. Sometimes, if there is a band playing, there is a two or three dollar cover charge. The restaurants can also be quite costly, although it is possible to obtain a cheap Continental-style breakfast or a bowl of soup for \$3 or \$4. All the pubs and restaurants have a similar style about them. lots of wainscoting or some woody look, with a bit of brass. In short, George Street is at least in part a modish side street. The people who visit its establishments are a mixture; students, professors, intellectuals, artists, lawyers, doctors, up-and-comers, city council workers and offshore oil

rig workers. Some come to George Street for sex, some for company, some to be alone, other for music. On a Friday or Saturday night many are drunk. Some can afford to be here, others manage it.

Except for a truck unloading at one of the scrap metal depots or warehouses, or a car cutting across in a desperate and often futile attempt to beat the Water Street traffic, there is little activity on George Street in the earlier morning hours of the day. Most of the east end establishments do not open until late in the morning.

This cold November morning finds three ragged-looking men making their way towards the Dominion Scrap metal shop. Two of the three are carrying old car radiators wrapped in large green garbage bags. John, Robert and Bob rescued the radiators from the basement of Sally's boarding house earlier that morning.

John, who had been down in the basement on a chore for Sally the day before, had spotted them sitting wastefully in a corner behind the oil tank. Later, when he had returned to his room and related his find to Robert and Bob, they laid plans to take the rads from the house and sell them as scrap metal. Early the next morning, before anyone else was awake, John stole downstairs and into the basement. Robert went outside in the laneway to take the rads as John passed them out the window, while Bob stood watch at the top of the basement stairs.

John ran into trouble when he discovered the rads wouldn't

quite fit out the window. Two boards had been nailed along the bottom and top of the window box. John judged that if these two boards were removed the rads would fit through. Quickly and without hesitation he looked around the basement for something to pry the boards loose. There wasn't much time. Colin, who took care of the house for Sally, would be up making breakfast at seven thirty, and it was already quarter past. If Colin found out about the rads he would claim them as his own and there would be nothing that could be done about it.

Grabbing a piece of pipe that was lying on the dirt floor and putting it down behind the bottom board, John managed to pry this board off without too much trouble, but when he tried for the second the pipe slipped and went through the glass. John stopped for a second but a curse and a plea from Robert outside to hurry up before he froze to death soon brought him back into action. A couple of minutes later the radiators were passed to Robert who quickly placed them on the outside of the garden fence, out of sight of anyone in the house. They were all back in their rooms before breakfast call, the whole operation having taken less than ten minutes.

Immediately after breakfast the men hurried out the door, grabbed their rads and headed towards Dominion Scrap Metal. The Newfoundland Scrap Metal was closer but the man who worked there always insisted on taking off the radiator caps and the little pieces of hose that came with the rads. This, the men reasoned, made the radiators weigh less and less weight meant less money.

The three men stood in front of the Dominion Scrap Sales entrance for a few minutes trying to decide who would go in to do the selling. The building is old and grey with wear, its sides bowed outward in the middle showing the signs of a rotted support structure. It was dark and greasy inside and the place had a mixed smell of battery acid and smoke from a cutting torch. Bob took the radiators from John and Robert and disappeared inside. John and Robert had carried them all the way from Crosbie Street so it was felt only right that Bob should do the selling and then buy the liquor. He soon reappeared waving two five dollar bills. A brief discussion took place and there was a quick search of pockets for any change, but none was found. Bob headed down Adelaide Street towards the Murray Premises Liquor Store. Five minutes later he returned with two bottles of cheap wine. The three men made their way to the entrance of an alleyway between Osmond's Furniture store and Sam's Bar. When they were sure that no one was looking they went down the alley and turned left. There amidst the bottle caps, broken glass and garbage the three settled down against the greyed wall of a Water Street shop to drink their wine.

Robert was a tall, skinny, rake of a man. His face, with its drooping upper lip, looked tired and hopeless as he hunched against the grey building with the bottle of cheap wine in his hand. Robert had grown up in St. John's and attended school until he was sixteen. He had grade eleven though, and that is as high as most people go in school. After leaving school Robert went to work for a local grocery as a busboy.

For the most part Robert's early life could be described as one of routine. He got up in the morning, went to work all day and came home. Throughout the day he would eat his three meals and grab a couple of beers at the local tavern. On Friday and Saturday he would go to a dance or to a movie or go drinking with the boys. On Sunday he would go to church and spend the day with the family. Things went on like this day in day out for much of the time, with of course the odd fishing or hunting trip, a Christmas or Easter celebration thrown in for good measure, till Robert married and moved out of his parent's house.

Robert continued working at the grocery store and worked his way up to become store manager. When the store opened a wholesale department to service different parts of the island Robert was promoted to sales representative. But the job involved a great deal of travel and, for a reason not entirely clear to himself, the more Robert traveled the more he began to drink. He soon found that he could manage his job and pop in and out of the local tavern from time to time. But as the years went by Robert found that he liked popping in for a beer at the tavern more than he liked working. He began to frequent the tavern more often until he, like many alcoholics, found that his "job was interfering with his drinking". It wasn't long before he quit his job. From there it was just a short step to quitting his family, along with losing his car and house. Pretty soon Robert was living on the street. He went to the Social Assistance office and they placed him in a boarding house. He has tried to give up drinking but has so far been unsuccessful.

John grew up in a small community on the east side of Bonavista Bay. John went to school from the time he was six until he was fourteen, but most of his education came after that, beginning when his father found him a job in Gander as a cook's helper. When he reported for work at the construction site he was given a pick and shovel instead of pots and pans and put into a ditch to level off pipe for the City's waterworks.

He stayed there for three or four months until he received word to join his father in Argentina, and there John picked up a trade: welding. The job lasted nearly two years. When it was finished John and a few of his friends had themselves bonded into the United States to work in a nickel mine in Connecticut. They signed contracts for seventy cents an hour and were supposed to stay with that company at that pay for the duration of the contract. When the contract was finished John returned to Newfoundland and found employment at the dockyards in St. John's.

John's life continued on like this until he was thirty. He would take employment wherever there was a job to be had, and when the job was finished he would move on. The only break in this routine came while on a job in Stephenville, where he met a woman named Cindy Macbride and they were married. Together they moved back to John's home community where he tried to make a go at fishing. But fishing is a skilled trade too, and John did not know much about it. In any case fishing was poor that year. John returned to doing what he knew best- a migrant labourer who specialized in welding.

For the next twelve years John spent nine or ten months of the year away working and two or three months at home. This placed tremendous pressure on the family. Cindy was forced to raise the children and look after the household chores herself while John never really became fully integrated into the family unit. Five children and thirteen years of marriage later John returned home from Labrador City to a vacant house. Cindy, fed up with the situation, had taken the children and belongings and moved back to Stephenville.

John accepted Cindy's decision. He realized that there hadn't really been much of a family but he asked "What was I supposed to do? I had to go where the work was." And, indeed, he was soon off again to work in the Tar Sands project in Alberta. He stayed there until the project finished, sending money to Cindy on a fairly regular basis. When this project finished John returned home where he spent a good part of the year collecting unemployment insurance benefits. When there were only a couple of months left on his UI claim he came to St. John's looking for work.

Unable to find employment in the city, John made phone calls to friends in Toronto, Edmonton and Labrador City, but there were no jobs, and the Canada Employment Center was no help. When John's UI claim ran out he began to sell off his possessions: first his house, then some land. It was around this time, a time when he could ill afford to do so, that John began to drink more heavily. He had always liked to drink but now, with more time



than usual on his hands and depressed by his situation, drinking began to get the better of him. By the time his money had run out he looked like any other drunk and was treated that way by social services workers. He was given the minimal amount of financial support and placed into a boarding house.

John has tried on a number of occasions to reduce his alcohol consumption, but boarding house life is not conducive to such a change. At any given time he may be rooming with other alcoholics. There are certainly other alcoholics in any boarding house whose clientele are welfare recipients, and, if a person's only source of income is a welfare cheque, then the social activities open to him are limited. Alcohol is often at the center of social life in a boarding house, and living conditions are such that it is difficult to abstain if one is an alcoholic.

John's last attempt to stop drinking came about a year ago. At this time he moved into the Harbour Lights Mission where the Salvation Army operates a program to help alcoholics stop drinking. It was here that he and Robert met and became friends. They left the Harbour Lights together after about a year and took a room at Sally's Boarding House, but soon found themselves back in the same situation as they were before they had entered the Harbour Lights, back on the bottle. Most programs aimed at helping alcoholics have this problem - they focus on the individual need to stop drinking but ignore the social problems which contribute to the drinking problem.

Bob was born up on Shea Heights ( sometimes called Blackhead Road or simply the Hill ) in St. John's. Bob has a handicap. He has a serious case of epilepsy and often suffers from convulsions and loss of consciousness. Obtaining employment in Newfoundland is at the best of times not easy. For someone who suffers convulsions and blackouts, finding a job is almost impossible. After both of his parents had died and the family house was sold Bob was effectively put out on the street. His brothers and sisters had families of their own and did not, Bob felt, need him around. One of Bob's brothers is also an epileptic and lives in similar circumstances in another boarding house across town.

In the alley off George Street, Bob rolled himself a cigarette from a mixture of butts collected from the ashtrays at the Harvey Road Welfare office late the previous afternoon. Robert fondled the first empty bottle and contemplated the second, while John tried to start a conversation on whether or not industrial pollution would create a greenhouse effect, raise the earth temperature, and create flooding along the Atlantic seaboard because of a melting of the polar icecaps.

John was interrupted by the opening of a backdoor. They all turned around to watch a cleaning lady throw a garbage bag into the alley then disappear back inside. Just as she closed the door two members of the Royal Newfoundland Constabulary turned the corner of the alley. "Drinking again" one of the officers said as he pulled out his ticket book. Robert quickly handed him

the empty bottle and acknowledged that they had just finished. They quietly accepted their twenty-five dollar fines for drinking in public, then headed out of the alleyway with the policemen.

The three walked on for a while then, when they felt that the police officers were well away turned around and headed back towards the alley. Peter had hidden the second bottle under the back steps of Sam's bar and they were determined to have it. When they had retrieved the bottle they moved farther on up George Street to another alley behind Greg's Diner. There they settled down for a drink and began to talk about their fines.

The fines themselves were not taken very seriously. There was, of course, no question of paying. Between them they hadn't seventy-five cents let alone seventy-five dollars. Besides, both Robert and Bob had given wrong addresses so there was a pretty good chance that the police would not even bother looking for them. It was, after all, only twenty-five dollars and it would cost the city more than that to find them. John, on the other hand, was not concerned with serving time, which would amount to only a few days in the lockup. Living conditions there were after all considered as good as those at the boarding house. John did wonder, however, if it would be possible to arrange to serve the time during the Christmas season. He reasoned that the food might be better then, and he probably wouldn't have to serve the full amount of time since there is some leniency in the holiday season.

But the discussion about the tickets did have its serious side. There has been an increase in the number of tickets issued for drinking in public and the city council, especially Mayor John Murphy and counselor Andy Wells, came under attack for it. Robert, for example, felt that it was Murphy's fault that they were being fined. He also felt that the fines themselves didn't make a great deal of sense as the only ones who were fined for drinking in public were people who couldn't afford to pay them. Robert also noted that the reason that people like them drank in public was because they could afford to do little else. John agreed and added his own observations saying that he believed that most police did not want to give out the fines but were being forced to do so by Murphy and Wells. John especially blamed Murphy and he felt that Murphy was probably mad at them (he was referring to all those who, like them, drank on the street) because they used to drink in the alley next to Murphy's Water Street store.

Like the alcohol rehabilitation programs, the issuing of twenty-five dollar tickets for public drinking is directed at the individual but does nothing to correct the social problems that lie behind his behavior. Unemployment is as much to blame for John's problem as anything. Bob has the added problem of a physical handicap as well as the negative attitude that many people of the general population hold towards Bob and others like him. Only Robert, could it be argued, has fallen from social grace. But even here it must be remembered that it is the sum total of Robert's life experiences which has brought him to his

present situation.

It was close to twelve when they finished the second bottle and John noted that it would soon be time for lunch. Lunch time was from twelve to twelve-thirty and they would have to hurry if they were to make it on time. If they were late they would have to do without.

### Chapter. 3

#### Setting: In the House.

The boarding house on Crosbie Street, located in the west end of the city, is a variation of the Southcott style that first became popular after the fire of 1892 burned most of St. John's. (O'Dea:1974;16-19) The house stands three stories high, with large bay windows protruding from the bottom level. The house is topped by two large hooded dormer windows, set into the curved mansard roof. A heavy wrought iron gate swings open to a set of wooden steps, which, like many steps built in St. John's, have risers which are too high and treads that are too small, causing people to stumble up and down the steps instead of walking. At the top of the steps there is a small verandah and a large oak door with wide trim members. Except for a little bit of peeling paint and a well worn "for sale" sign which is tacked onto the clapboard, the house creates an impression of solidarity and respectability.

Inside, this impression is reinforced by the mahogany wainscoting, carved bannisters and molding, decorative wallpaper and a small chandelier hanging from a smooth plastered ceiling, but it soon fades as the visitor's eyes become adjusted to the dim light. Four different kinds of decorative wallpaper have been plastered on in random order. The wallpaper seems to have a number of unidentifiable objects attached to it and is stained in

a number of places. The carpet, too, is made up of a number of different pieces, randomly patched together, and it is also stained and dirty. The chandelier is covered with cobwebs and a dried fly or two. The glass belonging to the side lights of the porch entrance has disappeared.

Walking up the stairs leading to the upper floors, the visitor can see the troughs of dirt accumulated around the moldings of the bottom panelling. The stair carpet, once a bright orange, is streaked with mud and vomit, and emits a smell like wet gym socks. At the top of the landing a wad of some unknown substance adheres to the baseboard.

The rooms in the house are in the same condition. All are of different shapes and sizes, and are wretched and small, smelling of poverty and neglect. In part, the smell comes from the general filthiness of the house, but much of it is also caused by the people who live there - an accumulation of years of alcoholic vomit and unwashed bodies. There is little ventilation, and the smell hangs constantly in the air. On the top floor a leaky roof keeps floors and walls damp and adds a smell of mildew to the mixture.

The first thing I can remember seeing when I was shown to my room by Colin, the caretaker of the house, is a big wad of bubble gum stuck in the corner to the left of the doorway, about twelve inches over a small narrow bed. Opposite this bed, in the corner to the right of the doorway was another bed occupied by a large lump wrapped up in a blanket, which I presumed was my roommate.

Directly opposite the entrance was another bed with a suitcase at the foot showing that it was occupied. People in boarding house often keep their few possession locked up in a suitcase which is often kept at the foot of their bed. One man in the house locked his suitcase to his bedstead.

I concluded that the bed which shared the corner with the wad of bubble gum was mine. Turning towards Colin for more information I found him picking his nose, something he often did while talking to people. Sometimes he would roll the material he removed between his fingers and flick it onto the floor where it became part of the carpet.

Generally speaking, people come to accept the dirt and filth of their environment. They have no choice but to do so. The operator rarely supplies soap, mops, or a bucket, and no one who lived there could afford these things. In any case, with the falling ceiling and peeling wallpaper even a good cleaning would not really make the place look clean. The residents are forced to accept this type of environment because they can not afford to live anywhere else, and once an environment is accepted it is an easy step to contributing to it.

My two roommates were older than myself. Roger was an old age pensioner, and Ralph was in his fifties. Roger had been living in a boarding house of one kind or another for most of his adult life. He had originally set out to be a priest, but on returning home from the seminary to visit his mother, who had lived alone since her husband had died and the last of the



children had moved away, he found that she had died alone and unnoticed. Roger did not go back to his studies but chose instead to move to St. John's to live with his brother. He took employment as a clerk with the Newfoundland Railway. In the few months I was in the boarding house I never really learned much more than this about him. Somewhere along the way he took an early government pension because of a heart problem, which was severe enough to warrant regular checkups. During my stay there Roger left at one time for two weeks of observation in the hospital due to an attack. There does not appear to be any clear reason as to why Roger is not staying at his brother's place. He says that "he doesn't want to be a bother" and wants "to be on his own". He visits his brother regularly and seems to have friendly relations with his brother's family.

Ralph was the other boarder sharing the room with Roger and me, and was the only person in the house who worked, having a part time job at the railway as a labourer. This job provided him with only about ten or twelve weeks of work a year, but this was enough to make him eligible for Unemployment Insurance Benefits, which meant that he was considerably better off than most people in the house. Indeed there seemed no economic necessity for him to be living under such conditions, since he could easily have afforded a better place to live. However Roger was a steady drinker; in the four months that I stayed at the boarding house I cannot remember seeing him sober. Taking into consideration the fact that he did most of his drinking in bars it is not difficult to imagine him spending all his money.

The number of boarders at the house at any one time averaged about fifteen. This number could vary from day to day, but it rarely went below ten or higher than twenty. Most of the people in this house were receiving Social Assistance payments, one payment for rent the other for self maintenance. The rent payment was allocated once a month. Those classed as long-term recipients received a cheque in the mail, short-term recipients had to pick up their payments at the main Social Services office. For most people the cheque is made out to the recipient, who is expected to turn it over to the boarding house operators. Sometimes, however, the payment is held up by the Department of Social Services and the recipient has to come to the office merely to sign the cheque over to the operator of the house in which he or she is living. The operator will receive the cheque at a later date. This arrangement is put into place when a boarder has a history of spending the rent money on things other than rent.

The maintenance allowance payment comes once every two weeks in the form of a cheque mailed to long-term recipients or picked up by short-term recipients. It varies from person to person and could be as low as \$36 a month or as high as \$60. People on long term assistance usually receive more than those on short term.

Most people in this house were on the lower end of this scale with the average, as near as I could determine, around \$40 a month or \$20 every two weeks. This is a yearly amount of self maintenance of about \$480. Rental and maintenance allowance

combined make a yearly income of \$2880.<sup>8</sup> The highest amount of self maintenance received in the house, \$60 a month, would give a boarder a yearly income of around \$3120. Out of the maintenance allowance a boarder is expected to provide such necessities as toothpaste, soap, toilet paper, razors, tools, clothes, shoes, laundry, and any other things that might be necessary to live in ~~St. John's, such as a raincoat, boots, overcoat, hat and mitts~~ or gloves, and so on. Obviously a boarder can not buy all the items that he or she needs out of the basic self maintenance payments. Even with the help of the Goodwill Stores and the Salvation Army and Catholic Action Centers, all of which supply clothing, it is extremely hard to keep properly dressed and clean. Under these conditions things like toilet paper and soap become luxuries. Many boarding house residents do not buy them but steal them from public washrooms when they can.

Not all boarders receive even the basic allowance, and some have to go without any self maintenance at all. Some boarding house operators are known to brow-beat their boarders into signing over the maintenance cheque as well as the rental. One study by the department of special services notes;

many ex-psychiatric patients are abused and taken advantage of. Ms. P., social worker at the Social Center, related an episode of trying to help Max who, having his board paid by Social Services, was receiving

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<sup>8</sup> The rent charged for accommodations varies from house to house and from person to person. At the time of writing some boarding houses were charging as much as \$250 while others charge as low as \$150. In this particular boarding house most individuals were charged \$200. A few were charged \$250. Recently these amounts have increased.

thirty (\$30.00) for himself in two by-monthly cheques of \$15.00. Each time his cheque arrived, the boarding house mistress has him sign it then gives him five (\$5.00) dollars. Max asked Ms. P for help finding alternative accommodations. She was successful in finding another boarding house and helped Max move. However, his former boarding house mistress was not aware of the move and when she found out about it ( her daughter was running the house for a few days ) she went to the other boarding house and demanded that Max return with her. She stated that she had his cheque and she would not give it to the new boarding house mistress. Max was quite upset and brow-beaten, so he returned to his original boarding mistress. Ms. P. visited and was able to talk to Max, who in private, stated he wanted to leave but when faced with the actual leaving and having to confront the boarding house mistress changed his mind and stayed. Another boarder in the same house reported that ten ( \$10.00 ) dollars is kept by the boarding house mistress. (Government of Newfoundland, 1984, 18)

Some boarders receive no maintenance allowance in the first place. Sean, who stayed in the room next to mine, was twenty-one and had recently been released from prison. Sean had grown up in the east end of St. John's. After he had left school he went to work in one of the local bakeries as an assistant baker, but because of a downturn in the economy he was laid off after two years service. For a while, about one year, he was able to live off his unemployment benefits but when these ran out he found himself without any source of income, leaving his mother, an unskilled and low paid worker, as the only source of income for the family. As time went on Sean became increasingly frustrated. " I couldn't do anything or go anywhere because you can't do anything without money", he said.

The economy failed to improve and more and more of Sean's friends found themselves without work. But while Sean and his friends found they had fewer things to do and fewer things they

could do, they were still being bombarded with television commercials and other advertising media that defined for them the things they should have been doing and possessions they should have. Sean and his friends were by this definition failures.

Unable to obtain the material markers of success by legal means, Sean and his friends decided to obtain them illegally. They carried out a few robberies undetected but were soon caught breaking and entering a Store on Water Street. When Sean got out of prison his mother would not let him back into the house. His father had moved to the United States and there were no places where Sean could find shelter. Without money he was forced to go to the Department of Social Services for help, but once again Sean found himself the victim of the depressed economy in the form of a new regulation which became effective on October 1, 1982.

assistance to the single able bodied and childless couples will be kept at an absolute minimum and assistance will be issued in cases where there are no alternatives and where hardships will be endured if assistance is not given. (Government of Newfoundland, 1982:1)

The operative words in this new regulation are "no alternatives" and "absolute minimum". Because Sean had relatives living in St. John's the Department felt that he could live with them so he was denied assistance. The social worker seemed to have ignored the fact that he was not wanted by his relatives. For the next two weeks he slept where he could, sometimes in a garage, an empty car, a vacant house, and on a park bench. He was forced to beg and steal.

After two weeks of this Sean went to see his probation officer. An argument ensued with Sean demanding that something be done to help him. Finally, frustrated beyond endurance, Sean picked up a chair and threw it at the probation officer. The chair did not hit the target but the threat of violence seemed to have an effect. The probation officer phoned Mr. Hickey, then Minister of Social Services, and after explaining the situation was able to obtain for Sean room and board at the house on Crosbie Street. However, Sean's allowance was kept at an "absolute minimum" and he was thus not given the basic self maintenance. This meant that he had to steal to obtain even the most basic items, such as toilet paper and soap.

Finally, there are the boarders who receive old age and disability pensions. To be qualify for a disability pension you must be under the age of 65 and be certified medically unable to work. You must also have paid into the Canada Pension Plan for a minimum of seven years with five of those seven coming in the last ten years. Allowances are based on a percentage of your last salary with the maximum being \$414.13 per month. The Newfoundland average is around \$300.

The basic old age pension is \$276.54 a month. However if you have no other source of income and are single, you may receive a supplement to the old age pension of \$328.66 for a monthly total of \$605.20. This is a yearly income of around \$7262.40. Old age pensioners who receive a supplement also receive free medical care. So, while these people are generally

considered to be at the low end of our social economic scale, they are considerably better off than most boarders.

The people who live in the house and others like it come from varied backgrounds. Some have been unemployed for long periods, some are alcoholics, others are elderly or physically or mentally handicapped. But while their life histories may differ, they now share many things in common. They lack a control over their day to day lives. They have few personal possessions, and are dependent upon some form of state support for food and shelter. The amount of state support that they receive is often inadequate for meeting everyday needs, forcing some of the people to steal, and all to live below acceptable standards set down by the society.

The Crosbie Street boarding house is owned by a local St. John's lawyer. He was intending to sell the house when he was approached by Sally and her partner Joe, who wanted to rent it and operate a boarding house. It had been a boarding house before, but had been closed down by the City Inspector after an incident in which one of the residents, well known in the downtown area for dressing up in old-fashioned army uniforms, started a fire in the middle of one of the rooms. As the inspector relates the story there seems to have been no heat in the house and the fellow, not knowing any better, had just been trying to keep warm. In spite of this history, the lawyer was willing to rent the house to Sally and Joe, who already ran another house on Job Street. Because they both lived in the Job

Street house they took in only a few boarders there.

Sally is a small woman, around fifty years old. She has been running a boarding house of one kind or another for the last fifteen years. At one time she ran quite a respectable boarding house which catered only to nurses. However, as the years went by and she continued to drink, her physical and mental health deteriorated. Her changing attitudes, impaired co-ordination and mental processes, things that happen with the abuse of alcohol, soon found Sally in a lower economic position with less status and out of business.

Joe came from a fairly well off family. He too had a problem with alcohol and drank the family business into the ground. He met Sally and together they decided to try to operate a boarding house. They found however a need for someone to live at the house on a permanent basis. There was some vandalism, a good deal of fighting, and people staying at the house without paying rent. These were things that Sally and Joe could not, and did not want to handle by themselves. At this time Sally remembered that a cousin of hers had just been divorced and was on the beach.

Colin was born and raised on the south side of St. John's. He comes from a family that has fished for as long as the family history goes back. However, like many fishermen in the late 1960s, Colin was having trouble making a living. When he was offered a steady job at a local wood supply dealer he sold his fishing gear and left the fishery for what he felt would be a



regular pay cheque. For a while it was, but with a decline in the building trade in the 1970's Colin was one of the first to be laid off.

Building did pick up again for a short while, but Colin was not taken back on. When his unemployment insurance claim ran out Colin, with his wife and two daughters, was forced to go on welfare. Colin used to supplement his social assistance by driving around in his truck and collecting scrap metal, batteries and other saleable items. He had always liked a drink and with more time on his hands he began to drink more. One day he woke up to find out that he had sold his truck for \$150 while drunk the night before. This put an end to his small business, cut down on his income and gave him more free time. His drinking increased, and the abusive manner which came with it placed pressure on the family structure until finally it collapsed. Colin found himself living in various boarding houses around the city until asked to be a part-time caretaker at the Crosbie Street boarding house, which paid him six dollars a day, irregularly, and gave him the use of the ground floor apartment.

Sally and Joe's only source of income is the money they receive from the boarding house. At first glance this might seem like a fairly large sum. In the two houses combined they kept an average of twenty boarders, about fifteen paying \$200 a month and five paying \$250, for a gross monthly income of \$4250. However, from this they must pay all the operating expenses; heat, light, rent, food, salaries. (See figure 1).

(Figure 1).

<u>expenditures.....</u>	<u>estimated costs</u>
heat.....	\$200
light.....	\$ 50
Colin.....	\$168
Salaries(Sally Sally&Joe's Joe's).	\$1480
food(\$3 a day per boarder).....	\$1680
<u>Total.....</u>	<u>\$3498</u>

These figures do not include the \$900 charged for rent which would bring total expenditures to \$4398, leaving Sally and Joe with an operating deficit of around \$148, meaning that less is actually spent on food, heat, light, and salaries than estimated. There is no money for repairs and upkeep, broken windows are not repaired, drafty chimneys continue to be drafty, and leaky roofs continue to leak. When repairs are done they are usually shabby and ineffectual. As a result, the house continues to deteriorate and the cost of operation increases.

If it is a circle that the boarding house operator has difficulty getting out of. It may be easy to pay an extra ten dollars for heat once a month when all of the rent has been collected, but it is not so easy to spend ten dollars on repairing windows, thus saving heat, when there is no money left after the bills have been paid, especially when a piece of cardboard has done the job for the last month. In these circumstances even things like a broom, mop, cleaning materials, dishes, pans, plates, and other things that are necessary in the running of a good boarding house become luxury items.

The low income boarding house, is structured on a foundation of poverty. But a close inspection shows a hierarchical structure similar to those found in most established businesses. At the bottom are the boarders, who it is true are not workers, so the owner of the means of production is not appropriating a part of their labour. But the boarders do receive money for their sickness: alcoholism, personal incompetence, or their inability to obtain employment, and the lawyer, the owner of the house, does receive a certain amount of this money in the form of rent. In the middle of all this is Sally and Joe, who help the lawyer create and accumulate surplus capital. They receive very little rewards for their efforts and essentially the only one who benefits from this structure is the lawyer who owns the house.

## Chapter 4

### Morning, noon, and night.

Crosbie Street is about a five-minute walk from the City's downtown teamsters' yard and container terminal where from about eight in the morning until four in the evening men on loading docks place assorted packages onto half-ton pickups, vans and larger tandem trucks, and oversized electro-magnetic forklifts pick up large metal containers and drop them gently onto big tractor-trailer rigs. Many of the rigs come from out of town to pick up goods and supplies from the yards for distribution throughout the island. Most of the rigs' drivers coming into the city for this purpose make their way into the city via the Harbour Arterial which runs down along the South Side Hills. By some flaw in design, both exits from the Arterial drop the trucks onto Water Street past the teamster yard, and heading away from it. The quickest way too correct this mistake is to turn left on the exit onto New Gower Street, up Crosbie, down Patrick and back onto Water Street and thus back to the yards. Many of the rig drivers like to get to the yard early because on a first-come first-serve system, the earlier you get there the earlier you get away. This is especially important for those drivers who have to travel long distances as it eliminates a certain amount of night driving.

Thus, at about eight o'clock each week-day morning large tractor trailers grind their way up Crosbie Street with just inches to spare between the cars parked on both sides. It requires a good deal of driving skill. It also makes a great deal of noise. For the boarders at Sally's it is a reminder that another day has come. Since breakfast at Sally's is served at eight-thirty, the noise is timely. With the rumble and roar of the trucks making their way towards the loading bays also comes the creak of beds, the clearing of throats, and the flushing of the toilet.

Boarders who have early morning appointments with doctors or social workers - and there are usually some - rise sooner than the rest. If they wish to guarantee themselves a wash as well as breakfast it is imperative to do so. With only one bathroom for as many as twenty boarders, morning access for all is almost impossible.

The kitchen seats only twelve people at a time. If there are more than twelve boarders, anyone not among the first to go in must wait for the second sitting. There is no use asking Colin - or the other boarders for that matter - for a skip into the first sitting. Anyone trying it will simply be told that he should have gotten up earlier. Thus it is not unusual for people to leave the house without a wash or breakfast in order to make an appointment on time.

Shortly after eight, the hallway of the second floor is crowded with boarders. Some stand around with soap and towels in

hand waiting for a chance to wash; others are simply waiting for a call to breakfast. At first glance an observer would assume that there was no real order to the gathering, but a close look shows two distinct groups. At the bottom of the stairs leading to the third story are the alcoholics, drug-users and ex-offenders. Along the wall and down over the first-story landing are those who neither drink nor use drugs. The arrangement marks a separation between two groups who pursue different activities and have different and distinct attitudes. When they gather together like this in the early morning it is the alcoholics, drug-users and ex-offenders who control the conversation, and define the situation.<sup>9</sup> They talk about how much they drank the night before, how bad their hangovers are, where it might be easy to pick up some easy cash, whether or not there really was a buried treasure on Kelly's Island and so on. Most of the stories center around alcohol, drugs and/or money.

The day after John, Robert and Bob received their tickets for drinking in public, Colin was late with breakfast. He had been drinking the night before, which is the usual cause for his being late. It was already ten to nine and there were no sounds coming from the kitchen to indicate that he had started preparing the morning meal. One boarder had already left in order to make a nine o'clock appointment at the Department of Social Services.

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<sup>9</sup> Because they drink to excess on a regular basis, alcoholics, drug-users and ex-offenders can be classified here as the house drinkers. Other boarders may have the occasional beer or drink but generally speaking there are two distinct groups - drinkers and non-drinkers.

on Harv Road. He would have to face his social worker on an empty h. A lot of men had been drinking the night before and the conversation was centered around an attempt to remember what they had done the night before, with each in turn making an attempt to trace the night's events. John, can remember running into Dick Lowden, on his way to church. Ralph, my roommate, can remember being at Penny's Tavern. Bob recollects being let out of the lockup at around ten, and Robert cannot for the life of him recall how he received the welt under his eye. No one is able to complete last night's picture and we are left with only a sketchy outline.

Ralph sums up the conversation by stating, " I can't remember much when I'm drinking. I suppose I'll have to go around and check up on myself," and he leaves no doubt that he is looking forward to doing just that. Those not involved in the conversation remain glued to the wall and bannister - silent throughout the conversation, their faces showing disgust and disapproval.

A few minutes of silence goes by. Bob disappears into his room and reappears a few seconds later smoking a hand rolled cigarette. -Robert asks Bob if he can spare a roll. Bob hesitates, decides that he can, and they both disappear back into Bob's room. Mack is standing in the corner tapping his fingers gently on the window which overlooks the alleyway and John is humming a tune. Ralph decides that breakfast is not worth waiting for and goes to his room to prepare for a cold November's

morning walk. Bob and Robert reappear smoking cigarettes and John asks Robert to save him a few draws. The others stand, watch and listen.

Ralph returns about five minutes later wearing a large heavy overcoat and a woolen cap. Before going down over the stairs he stops at the bathroom door. Someone is already there. He turns and asks who is in there.

Mike gruffly answers, "Jeffery, and he's been in there long enough."

"Has he?" acknowledges Ralph as he starts pounding on the door, "Come on hurry up, you bastard, theres others here besides you." A few seconds later Jeffery, still wiping the soap from his face, appears in the doorway and mutters that he is sorry. Ralph pushes his way past him and slams the door. Jeffery makes his way up the stairs to the third floor and disappears into his room while we stand in silence, listening to Ralph empty his bladder.

Jeffery, a small thin nervous man, is married to the house's only permanent female resident, Mary. Originally from Bell Island, he has been living in St. John's for the last ten years and has been receiving psychiatric help during that time. Many boarders believe the shock treatments he received have made him worse because Jeffery is extremely nervous. Certainly the conditions under which he lives have not been helpful. He is constantly being teased by many of the other boarders. The



living conditions for his wife are also anything but ideal. She is constantly subjected to verbal abuse, usually of a sexual nature, from the other boarders.<sup>18</sup> Recently she was sexually assaulted by one of the men. She reported the incident to her social worker who in turn talked to the male boarder in question. He was told not to harass Mary again or his welfare payments would be cut, but nothing more was done. Her assailant was not required to move.

It is nine-thirty before Colin calls out that breakfast is ready. Even so there are still fourteen boarders waiting, so two are kept waiting a little longer. The kitchen is average in size, around fifteen by eight, but a rather large stove and fridge, twelve chrome chairs, and the twelve boarders they can accommodate makes mealtime a rather crowded affair.

It is partly because of the lack of space that food is served before the boarders arrive. It would be chaos to have twelve boarders up and about the kitchen at one time serving themselves, but it is also an attempt to ration and conserve certain items. Sugar and milk are rationed into the tea before it is served, the bread or toast is already buttered, and if there are twenty boarders there are twenty eggs. The only reason anyone is ~~allow to leave~~ his or her place is to leave the kitchen. Colin, who stands in the right-hand corner opposite the

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<sup>18</sup> The men usually comment on Mary's physical appearance. One comment they sometimes make is 'humahuma zig zag what a leg on that old bag'. The men at Sally's see women, in general, as good housekeepers and objects of sex.

kitchen entrance, acts as both waiter and sergeant-at-arms. If anyone wants a second cup of tea, or if the bread or toast which is piled on a plate in the middle of the table is eaten, boarders ask Colin for more.

On alternative mornings boarders are met with either toast, tea and a boiled egg, or toast, tea and a bowl of cream of wheat. The only change for breakfast is no meal at all. The first cup of tea is almost always cold, but each boarder is allowed one, and occasionally two additional cups, sugar and milk already included. The operators buy bread by the case, and boarders can eat as much bread as they can hold at one sitting.<sup>11</sup> Breakfast is by far the best meal of the day; apart from the monotony of eating an egg one day, cream of wheat the next, drinking tea with exactly one level teaspoon of sugar, and eating prebuttered toast that has been sitting on the table long enough to give it a rubbery texture, day after day without any say in the matter. The atmosphere is not improved by the presence of Colin, a six-foot-two, two hundred-pound, untidy hulk with an unshaven bulldog face, looming in the corner.

Breakfast is eaten with ~~more~~ small talk but unlike the conversation in the hallway where the alcoholics, drug-users and ex-offenders dominate, everyone participates. Its as if the same tiresome meal has been flavored with equality and the boarders temporarily forget their differences. Tee notes that the

<sup>11</sup> For most Newfoundlanders bread is considered a staple and large quantities of bread, served with margarine, are consumed with each meal.

Montreal Canadians have lost another game. Robert and John are expecting a cheque from welfare today and they agree to take a walk downtown together later that day. Tacker mentions that he found a two dollar bill on the sidewalk outside the house last night and half the boarders go through the ritual of claiming it as their own. The time allowed for each meal is exactly a half an hour so drinking, eating and talking become one activity. When the last boarder is finished Colin locks the kitchen door and begins to clean up.

The boarding house has no sitting-room or common area. There is no designated place where boarders can socialize, watch television or listen to the radio. The lack of such a space and the general living conditions, with three to a room, makes it impractical for the boarders to receive guests. There is a limited amount of visiting from room to room, usually just before and after meals. Gatherings such as the one described earlier on the second floor landing also take place at this time, but the area is not designed for social gatherings and any that take place are short-lived. The boarders are left with the choice of leaving the house or going back to their rooms after meals. Occasionally boarders will leave the house for a walk, an appointment with a doctor, social worker, or a visit to a local church to pray or just for a change of scene. The Newfoundland winter, plus the lack of appropriate clothing, often makes it impossible to go out even for a walk. Most boarders, which we can identify here as the non-drinkers, spend much of their time sitting on the edge of their beds staring at their toes or some

crack in the wall. They get up for breakfast then go back to their rooms and wait for dinner. After dinner they go back to their rooms and wait for supper. None of these boarders would say they enjoy their life, and indeed at times they complain bitterly about it. But for the most part they accept their life.

Other boarders, made up for the most part of drinkers, do not accept this type of life and look for something better to do. But without money to finance their activities they must beg, hustle or steal. In this house only Robert and Bob beg and then only occasionally. It was not a method of obtaining funds that anyone likes, but when it is done it is usually done with honesty and directness. Most people who panhandle do so for alcohol, and they will usually state frankly that they need a given amount of money to make up the price of a bottle.

Though not as profitable as panhandling, another method of raising money is hunting around for saleable items such as beer bottles, car batteries, radiators, copper, and lead. This can be a long and tiresome method of obtaining money. It is possible to walk the streets for hours before finding enough for a price of a bottle. A broken car battery found outside a garage across town has to be carried a mile or more back to George Street before it can be sold to a scrap metal shop. It is hard work to make money this way.

Stealing - more specifically, shoplifting, is the most common way of making money at this house. Food is the item most often taken although boarders who shoplift will take anything

that opportunity presents. Steaks or cartons of cigarettes can be sold almost anywhere, the most prominent places being the local taverns, a downtown taxi stand, and sometimes even the boarding house operators themselves.

When boarders of this group have been successful in obtaining money they usually buy alcohol. Sometimes, if they have a lot of money - such as the time a boarder stole and sold a portable television - they may drink in a cheap downtown bar, but usually they will drink on the street or back in the boarding house. It is on the latter occasions that conflict arises between the two different groups of boarders - those who are drinking and those who usually do not. The rowdy and sometimes boisterous behavior of the drinkers often interferes with the silent apathy of those who do not drink and they will complain to the drinkers and thus disturb their drinking.

Conflict involves different levels of violence, the most common form being some sort of yelling, screaming verbal abuse. Much of the animosity is hidden. Drinkers will gather and complain that the others are a bunch of "wimps", while the others will get together to complain that they can't get any peace and quiet. Occasionally disputes will be raised to the level of physical violence. It is usually the drinkers, whose comfort is found in the activities of stealing, begging and hustling, as opposed to the inactivity of the non-drinkers, who start it, and usually win. This is the reason why the non-drinkers fear those who drink, and why in the early morning

period before breakfast the alcoholics, drug-users and ex-offenders control the situation while the others listen passively in silence while waiting.

Sally usually arrives at the house by taxi at around ten-thirty. She knocks at the door to Colin's apartment and when let in takes a seat directly opposite the door, to the left of the fireplace. (There she spends most of her day smoking cigarettes, drinking vodka and watching television. She will usually give the bottle to Colin who runs back and forth to the kitchen preparing her drinks. Sally always looks tired. Her eyes and long wrinkled face seem to cry out for sleep. Her high heels, and tight, knee-length dresses, and alcoholism lend a chronic gracelessness to her movement and when she sets out to do something, take a pan off the stove, put a glass in the sink or brush back her hair, you wonder if she will succeed.

Today Sally has left the door to Colin's apartment open. Many of the boarders will receive their maintenance cheques today and Sally is anxious in keeping track of them. When the mail arrives Sally thumbs through the envelopes and takes out those belonging to Robert, Bob and John. She goes upstairs to their room and tells them that their cheque have arrived, but that they will not receive them unless they do certain chores around the house. Bob is ordered to clean the bathroom while Robert and John are told to clean the hallway and empty the garbage.

Not everyone in the house receives such threats. Some escape because they pick up their self-maintenance at the Harvey

Road office so Sally doesn't have access to them. Others - perhaps most - would simply not put up with it. Sally must gauge who she can push around.

It is almost taken for granted that ex-psychiatric patients can be abused. Debbie was a young woman who, after two years of marriage, found herself dominated by an alcoholic husband who abused her physically as well as verbally. Unable to manage the strain of such a relationship, Debbie suffered a nervous breakdown and was institutionalized for several months. When she was released from hospital she decided not to return to her husband and with the help of relatives and the Department of Social Services took lodgings at Sally's, just after Sally and Joe had entered into their partnership. Colin was not yet living at the house so Sally was staying in the downstairs apartment and running the house by herself.

Debbie moved into a small second floor room of her own, but from the beginning she was in trouble. The boarders constantly teased and sexually harassed her and even stole her things right in front of her. She complained to Sally but her complaints were ignored. Boarders often sell off their goods in order to raise a few dollars and Sally believed - or professed to believe - that this was what Debbie was doing.

Finally, after a warning from the Department of Social Services, Sally allowed Debbie to move into the downstairs apartment with her. In return, Sally forced her to wash the dishes, help prepare the meals and clean the house. All during

this time Debbie, spent her free time looking for employment. She was luckier than most and found employment as a live-in housekeeper for a lawyer whose wife had left him. Debbie was to help raise his two children and take care of the household duties. The lawyer came to help Debbie move, but when he arrived he was met by Sally who proceeded to tell him that Debbie had just been released from the Mental Hospital, that she had not really adjusted well to life in the house, and was still a bit unstable. Despite having interviewed Debbie and being quite satisfied that she would be quite acceptable for the job, the lawyer had second thoughts. Debbie was not given the job. A couple of days later she was back in the hospital.

This story is not untypical. Most boarding house operators, like most people in the society in general, have little sympathy for ex-psychiatric patients. Little wonder that 78% of ex-patients released into a boarding house return to the hospital because of social reasons rather than personal problems (Rowe:1984-1). Living conditions at the Waterford Hospital are felt by many ex-patients to be better than those found in some boarding houses.

In the cases of Robert, Bob and John, the circumstances are different. Sally knows that Robert and Bob have been thrown out of a number of boarding houses in the past, Robert for being drunk and disorderly and Bob for having epileptic fits, often brought on by drinking. Both would have difficulty in finding other lodgings. John was found dead drunk in the hallway a week ago.



Sally can use these incidents to pressure them into doing chores. At the same time, she has cultivated a relationship with the three. Robert can sometimes borrow five or ten dollars from Sally as an advance on his self-maintenance cheque and occasionally she will give him or Bob a package of tobacco for their work. John, the favorite boarder in spite of his drinking, often runs errands for her. Because of his work history John is considered quite a handyman and when something needs to be fixed it is John who is asked to fix it, and he too will be passed the occasional packet of tobacco. Sometimes when discussing some chore with Sally he will sit downstairs, drink tea and watch Colin's television. On one occasion when Colin was in hospital for two weeks after a particularly heavy bout of drinking, John received the enviable task of minding the house in place of Colin, and briefly enjoyed a one-bedroom apartment, color TV, and access to the kitchen.

By the use of such rewards, Sally can get small chores done without the threat of withholding a welfare cheque. It takes but a few minutes to empty the waste paper baskets of each room, and Robert will gladly give up a few minutes of doing nothing if it means he can borrow five dollars for a bottle of wine. For Sally the boarders are a source of cheap labour. She cannot afford to pay a carpenter \$10 an hour to fix a window or sheet up the chimney, but she can manage a packet of tobacco and a cup of tea. While the work might be shoddy, partly because John hasn't the equipment or experience to do a proper job of it, there is at least the appearance of a response to the complaints boarders

have about drafts in their rooms.

Threats such as the withholding of welfare cheque are more symbolic than real, but they do serve a purpose. For one thing, they reinforce the boundary between boarding house operator and boarding house resident, and emphasize the power of one over the other. Sally is, after all, not very different from her boarders, and her authority over them is tenuous and must be maintained in part by symbolic acts, fictions, and evasion. For example, it is quite acceptable for Sally to hear from another boarder about John being dead drunk in the hallway or that Robert kicked in a door last night while drunk. It is not acceptable, however, for Sally to find John drunk in the hallway or see Robert kicking a door. This would represent a direct affront to her authority and she would feel impelled to display her autocratic position.

As twelve o'clock approaches Sally is in the kitchen setting places for dinner, cigarette hanging loosely from the corner of her mouth. She removes it for a moment to finish off another predinner drink. Tossing back the last few drops of her vodka she signals to Colin to let the boarders know that dinner is ready. A few minutes later twelve boarders are seated and picking gingerly at their meal: two scoops of potatoes and a hot dog bun covered with gravy. Most meals at the house are not as frugal as this one, but this one is particularly bad.

A couple of boarders rise, throw their dinner into the garbage, and leave. Sally stares after them in anger. "Whats

the sense in cooking around here when you guys don't even appreciate it? Fuckin' boarders you guys are, worthless scum!" Each meal when Sally is present is also invariably, a half-hour of abuse and complaints about how hard her life has been, how expensive the food is, how the boarders do not appreciate what she does for them, how stupid and unkind the boarders are, how dirty they are, how the boarders had better shape up or it was out the door for them. Sometimes Sally is able to complain, order and abuse the boarders all in the same breath: "Now, Bob, I don't want you to turn up that heat too much. You know what happens if you do, don't you John? And I want that bathroom kept clean, do you hear me Robert? Because its out you go and thats right because I don't need this shit." For their part the boarders usually display a ritual respect of silence and continue with their meal.

Today Sally was complaining about the high cost of heating oil and even though it was mid-November she threatened to evict anyone who was caught with the heat turned on in their room. She was midway through a sentence when she was interrupted by Bill Bragen. "Have you got a package of cigarettes Mrs?" There was a brief silence at this absurd request and Bill gave a quick wink to the boarders sitting at his table before again requesting "a package of cigarettes." "You see Mrs., I got no money and I need some smokes." He smiled, gave another wink at the boarders, then turned back to Sally.

Bill, a small, white-haired, round-bellied man, always wore

a smile. He had left the house earlier that morning without breakfast to collect beer bottles, pieces of metal and anything else that he could sell. Walking down the railway line towards Bowring Park he had come upon a large roll of copper tubing. There was more than he could possibly carry at one time so he rolled it down the bank of the Waterford River which runs parallel to the railway tracks, and hid it in the thickets that grew there. Bending off a section of it he headed back towards George Street and the Dominion Scrap Metal Sales Company where he obtained enough for a bottle of old Niagara and two cigarettes. After picking up his bottle and smokes Bill made his way up George Street to the alley behind Greg's Diner. When he had finished drinking he proceeded back to the boarding house and was in time for dinner.

"What do you mean by coming to the dinner table drunk?" Sally shouted, "of all the nerve." With that she stepped across the room and started to hit Bill on the back of the head repeatedly with her hand. Bill got up from his chair and ran out into the hallway. Sally stood in the middle of the room shouting and screaming in near hysteria. Finally she ran from the kitchen into Colin's bedroom where she sat down on the corner of the bed and cried.

Dinner is usually not as chaotic as this. The boarders come to the kitchen, sit down, eat their meal and chat, and leave, but bedlam is never far below the surface and Sally, Colin, and the boarders can feel its existence.

After dinner most boarders retreat to their rooms where they wait in silence for supper. Some take an occasional walk along Water Street or a browse through Woolworths. Some will sit in a cafe and watch the people move about for a couple of hours. One of the men at the Crosbie Street house has taken on this activity with a keen sort of interest, taking pleasure in the motions and expressions of other people buying things. Sometimes a boarders might plan to meet a friend or a relative, but most boarders change boarding houses a lot and do not develop strong networks of friends, and relatives seldom have anything to do with the people in the boarding houses. Boarders rarely participate in any public activities such as a visit to a public library or museum.

There are certain activities that special groups within the boarding house are encouraged to participate in. Alcoholics can go to daily addiction clinics at the Health Sciences Complex, St. Clare's, and the Waterford Hospital. Psychiatric patients can go to the Canadian Mental Health Association's Social Center. While these offer a certain amount of recreation the main purpose of these programs is to educate, rehabilitate, and integrate individuals into mainstream society. These programs are not, however, designed to do anything about the problems that come with living in a low-income boarding house. When the day programs are over the individual still has to face all the problems of the boarding house environment.

Supper is served at five o'clock and most boarders are

present. By this time Sally has either gone home, is passed out on Colin's chesterfield, in which case Colin will have prepared supper, or she is out staggering around the kitchen preparing supper herself. Beans or potatoes and bologna, with the usual serving of bread and tea, are the most regularly served meals although there are substitutes. The food is, of course, already dished out and is cold by the time the boarders are called to eat it.

This evening Sally has already left the house so Colin has prepared the meal. Supper is a much more relaxed event when Sally is not there. Colin will allow the boarders to take their time, and an extra cup of tea is not out of the question. People who are waiting for the second sitting are allowed to wait in Colin's front room and watch television. Colin has prepared a good meal with two pieces of bologna instead of the usual one, potatoes, carrots and peas. The conversation is centered around Sally and how badly she had acted at dinner time. Colin and the boarders chat back and forth, all agreeing that Sally is insane and is running a mad house.

After supper the non-drinking boarders go back to their rooms to wait for breakfast while others go out to drink. A couple of boarders have a case of beer and they stay behind in Colin's apartment to drink with him. In return Colin will put on a second meal. Sometimes Colin will engage the services of boarders by getting them to sell food taken from the kitchen in order to get money to buy liquor. Most of Colin's relationships

are built around alcohol. He will only engage someone to sell food if that person drinks. A boarder will only be invited to one of Colin's special meals if he has alcohol or can contribute to the purchase of some. Those who do not drink are not invited, thus those who drink in the Crosbie Street House have the opportunity of eating better. The non-drinkers know that this type of thing is going on. Colin or one of the other boarders have been, on occasion, caught leaving the house with food. This type of activity helps raise the level of tension between the drinkers and those who do not drink, but those who grumble do so only among themselves. Most feel it unwise to complain to Sally as she is most likely to accept Colin's version. Sally will often refuse to listen to boarder's complaints and has often told a boarders who has tried to complain to go away or to be quiet. Besides, if Colin finds out that someone has complained then that person is in real danger of reprisals, often of a physical nature.

Sleep does not come easy at Sally's. Throughout the night boarders can be interrupted by any one of a number of things. Sometimes there are fights or all-out brawls. Police are frequently called to the house to break up such disturbances and often leave dragging a cursing boarder with them. Police have also been known to enter the house looking for a specific person in relation to some crime. A sleeping, sober boarder may be awakened by a drunken roommate who has decided to sing a song, or by some stranger who comes into the room merely to look around. The front door is open twenty-four hours a day and sometimes

someone who does not belong will come in late at night looking for an empty bed - someone who has been locked out of his own boarding house or who is homeless and looking for a place to stay. These disturbances can happen at any time, but they are rarer after about 12 midnight. There are usually a few hours of uneasy peace in the very early morning before the trucks begin to grind their way up Crosbie Street signaling the beginning of another day.



## Chapter 5.

### Boarders and Boarders

Among themselves, the boarders maintain very few close personal ties. This is in part because of the frequency with which boarders move from one boarding house to another. They ~~move~~ around a great deal not so much because they are forced by eviction to do so, although this is one reason, but because they quickly grow tired of a new boarding house.

Individuals exist in an environment but do not always control or choose the environment in which they live. The boarders at Sally's share a similar environment. They eat the same food, occupy relatively the same space, have low levels of education and together form an economic group. And these things do give rise to a certain comaraderie.

Friendship ties are usually organized around the meeting of immediate needs within the living environment - a need for food because supper was inadequate; a need for a drink because one has a hangover; a need for pills because one is coming off the booze. These are things that are best taken care of within the confines of the house. While the living environment from one house to another may be similar, a boarder can only be sure of the resources available in his particular house. Because boarders live below the poverty line they hesitate to enter into exchange

relationships where payment is not guaranteed. It is more advantageous to develop relationships with boarders in the same house because then it is possible to keep a closer account of the network of exchanges and the obligations they create. Beside, a boarder can never be sure of finding a friend living in another house. The friend might have moved on leaving no word of his whereabouts. If he is still there he may have developed new relationships and thus have new obligations.

One morning, after they had received their self-maintenance cheque, John and Bob stood on the landing of the second floor discussing what they might do with their cheques. As luck would have it Sam Hackett, a boarder living in a room at the back of the house over the kitchen, came in the door carrying two cans of export tobacco he had stolen from a downtown store. Sam knew when the self-maintenance cheques came and on those days he would go downtown and steal something that the boarders would buy. Tobacco seemed to be the favorite item and there was certainly no trouble in selling it.

After Bob and John had each bought a can for four dollars it was decided that they would go drinking. Because they had saved some money on the tobacco, John felt that it would be all right if they went to a bar downtown for a couple of beers. Bob agreed and they both went back to their rooms to get ready. They met a few minutes later on the bottom landing, went out the door and down Crosbie Street towards George Street. There on a side street off George, they found themselves a corner table in a cheap local

downtown bar.

Bob went to the bar and ordered a couple of beers. John sat quietly at the table watching a rather heavy-set man flick a pinball into action on the game that stood in the corner opposite. There were some quick rings and thumps as the ball bounced around from bumper to bumper but the ball soon shot off the side and went down between the two flippers. The heavy-set man gave the machine a solid knock on the side and watched a "tilt" sign flash on and off the screen.

Bob came back with the beer and sat down directly opposite John. John in the meantime pulled a small bottle of pills out of his pocket and offered them to Bob. Bob took some and emptied two capsules into his beer. John did the same and put the pills back into his pocket. John had gotten the pills with his welfare card sometime last week. The pills were obtained from John's doctor and were supposed to help him over bad bout of drinking softening the effects of a hangover. However the pills could be and more often were use for increasing the high obtained from alcohol.

They sat there long enough to drink another beer and take a few more pills. Bob noted that they now had only around ten dollars each to last them two weeks. He thought that they should leave the bar and go to the liquor store across the street and buy a flask of rum. John agreed that this would be the economical thing to do so they both left. After buying a cheap flask of rum they headed down an alley off George Street.

About a half hour later the flask was gone. Bob wanted to buy another but John hesitated. He pointed out that they had already spent \$8 on tobacco, \$6 on beer and \$8 on the previous flask, for a total of \$22. This meant they all they had left out of their two cheques was \$12. To buy another flask would mean they would have only \$4 between them to last two weeks. But Bob argued that it was just as well to spend the money on one good drunk and that you really couldn't do much with \$12 over a two week period anyway. The logic seemed irrefutable so John agreed and another flask was bought.

The combination of drugs and alcohol soon had their desired effect. Bob, who had taken quite a few more pills than John, was feeling especially high and by the time the second flask was half gone he realized that he had taken too much and would soon pass out. Hardly able to stand, he asked John to help him get to the Detox Center.

They set off down George Street, past the Harbour Light, a Salvation Army Rehabilitation center, towards Patrick Street and Deanery Avenue, where the Talbot House detoxification center is located. Just as they had moved off George Street and onto Springdale Bill noticed a paddy wagon at the traffic lights on the corner of Springdale and Water. When the lights turned green the wagon would come up Springdale, and the police would almost certainly notice them. They both agreed that John, because he was carrying the flask of rum, should leave Bob there. The police would see Bob and give him a ride to the Detox center or

the lockup. Either place was equally agreeable to Bob as a place to sleep off the effects of the alcohol and drugs, and there was no need of losing the half flask of rum. John left Bob and went back to the boarding house. Bob, as it turned out, went to the lockup. He was released a few hours later and went back to the boarding house to sleep. Q

Neither Bob or John has developed the habit of drinking two days in a row. When they have hangovers they usually take drugs, usually valium, to help them through their sickness. On the day after their drinking bout they were both suffering the after-effects, but they had used up all their pills with their beer and rum.

Robert, whose room was at that time next to Bob's, had also been drinking the day before. Robert is more severely alcoholic - for him the aftermath of a drinking session is expressed in a desperate need for another drink. This particular morning Robert was extremely sick. His whole body shook and twitched involuntarily so that he could barely walk, and his eyes were red and painful. He had taken some valium but it had not helped much. At about six in the morning he was struggling to get to the bathroom when he found Bob in the hallway

Each explained his situation, Bob that he needed valium, Robert that he needed a drink. Robert agreed to give Bob some pills while Bob, who had forgotten about the half flask of rum John had taken, agreed to let Robert know if he came across any. Later that morning John came into Bob's room with the flask

looking for pills to help calm his hangover. Bob gave John some of the pills and explained how he had obtained them from Robert. After they had decided that neither wanted the rum, John banged on the wall between Bob and Robert's rooms and shouted to Robert to come in. There was an almost painful look of gratitude on Robert's face as he grasped the flask in his two shaking hands and drank. He could hardly speak, but he gargled out words of thanks and with every word of thanks he gave a short shaky laugh.

It is these almost accidental generalized exchange relationships which are the most common and they are a necessary part of boarding house life. As Robert puts it;

People can get into the habit of helping one another and it's a good thing. People can also get into the habit of being a prick. They won't give a man a drop of his wine or whatever. It's the kind of habit worth breaking and you usually do when you're down. You find it hard to get by without friends.

Such relationships are kept in a calculated balance. A few days later I was in Bob's room drinking some beer and suggested that we might ask Robert to join us. Bob disagreed saying that it was wrong to ask someone too often because it would create a habit.

"Robert might think that he could walk in here anytime without contributing." Exchange relationships also reinforce the division between the drinking and drug-taking group and the others simply because of the goods exchanged, but the boundaries are not absolute. The drinkers have needs that the other do not have, but all boarders have some needs in common.

One night four boarders gathered in my room to complain about the food. It had been a particular bad day. Dinner had

consisted of Kraft macaroni dinner which by itself was edible, but Sally had mixed in some weiners that had gone bad. While it was possible to pick out the pieces of weiners, the macaroni was left with an unbearable sour taste. Supper had been an unnameable mixture that caused the boarders to make ironic jokes by pretending to guess the ingredients. The four agreed that they should go out for a meal but as they had no money this would involve begging. Undaunted, they decided to pool their resource and have a collective dinner party. Sean and Tee agreed to go to the two Catholic Convents, one at Belvedere, the other off Hamilton Avenue, and ask the Sisters for some food. They had simply to tell the Sisters that they were from Sally's boarding house, that they were hungry, and they would be given enough food for a couple of meals. Tee did not usually drink but as this was a dinner party he agreed that the occasion called for a drink of port or sherry. Robert and John, it was decided, would go around to the Catholic residence on Patrick Street, Robert to see Father Pete, John to see Father Greg. Father Pete and Father Greg would, judging from past experience, give them five dollars, out of which they would buy some cheap sherry. The four boarders all set out to complete their tasks and soon returned. Sean and Tee each had large plates of assorted cold cuts, cheese, bread and some fruit. This, coupled with Robert and John's sherry, made the meal just short of a feast.

As they sat eating the four boarders started to talk. Conversations like these illustrate the tenuousness of boarding house relationships. A wide range of topics are included, often

in what seems to be no particular order. Each participant follows his own train of thought, and the result is less a conversation than a collection of individual statements(Chairamonte 1978:15).

Robert: Most of my old friends don't really want much to with me anymore. When you're down people either ignore you or they put the boots to you.

John: Sally only gets away with this because she knows that there are worse places than this around and there are a lot of people needing a place. You tell me she's not making any money. Problem is she spends it all on booze.

Tee: The way things used to be a job used to be everything to a person. It was more than making a few bucks, it was also a place where you could meet people, friends that would last you a life-time. But nowadays a job is hard to come by.

These statements, although not always linked in conversational form, help to define the speakers as a group with common interests who live under similar circumstances, perhaps identifying the group as a class and raising their consciousness of it. As Robert, Tee, Sean and John sat around the room eating their cold cuts and drinking sherry they took a certain satisfaction in the fact that together they had used their knowledge of street life to silence the rumble of four empty stomachs.

Knowledge of street life is accumulated as an individual tries to meet his/her day to day needs. Since this process of socialization depends to a large extent on the meeting of individual needs the speed at which this accumulation takes place also depends on the individual's ability to identify his/her need



with those of the other boarders.

Sean, you will remember, spent two weeks living on the street when he was released from prison. During that period he was forced to steal and beg for food in order to survive. He had a little money but not enough to obtain accommodation. The Department of Social Services at first had refused to help because Sean was an able-bodied person, meaning that he was quite able to work, and because he was expected to live with his mother while he was in St. John's. It did not seem to matter that there was no work or that his mother refused to have anything to do with him. It was only after Sean's probation officer interceded on his behalf that Sean was given accommodation at Sally's. However Social Services agreed to pay only the price of the rent, so Sean was left without even the eighteen or twenty dollars self-maintenance most boarders receiving welfare get every two weeks.

At first Sean was quite happy to be off the street and for a while talked about nothing else. To sleep on a small cot in a room with two other men was far better than having no place to sleep and for the next couple of weeks he would leave the house every day in search of employment. But Sean's early feeling soon turned to frustration and anger. The conditions under which he lived became uncomfortable. He was not accustomed to eating such poorly-prepared meals. The fighting and bickering of the other boarders made him feel uncomfortable and while he liked to drink, the drinking of the other boarders disgusted him. But it was his

financial situation which frustrated him the most. He gave up walking to the unemployment office, located on the other side of town, because he concluded that there just were no jobs. Except for a brief walk he soon fell into the routine of going down for his meals and returning to his room. He had run out of razor blades and soap, and had taken to stealing toilet paper from another boarder. He spent most of the day pacing the room cursing his present circumstances. I was in his room sharing a cigarette with John when he stopped and exclaimed:

I got to get out of the place. The place is driving me nuts. But I won't be here long. If I don't get into the halfway house (John Howard Society) pretty soon I'm going to get money somehow. I can't do a thing except stay in this fuckin' room.

Sean was of course giving notice. Unlike many of the boarders he would not put up with the nausea of this kind of life. He was going to do something more than sit on the edge of his bed and stare at the wall.

Later that day John and I caught Sean stealing toilet paper from John. John, who felt sorry for Sean because he was only twenty-one, asked Sean why he did not get his own. When Sean replied that he could not afford to buy any John replied that soap, toilet paper and paper towels could be obtained free of charge from any public wash-room and that the best of these were located in hospital and government buildings. A few minutes later Sean and John were on their way to the Grace Hospital where Sean obtained some toilet paper and soap. Later that night John took Sean to the Belvedere Convent and explained that if he went up to the door and told the sister who answered that he was

staying at Sally's boarding house and was hungry he would probably be given something to eat. The next day John took Sean to the residence of Saint Patrick's Parish Church and was told that if he could get to see Father Pete or Father Greg he could probably get five dollars from either one. Again all that was necessary was an explanation that you were staying at Sally's and needed something to eat.

Sean's introduction into the economy of this class was then first concerned with the building up of a network of individuals who would be willing to help him meet his everyday needs. Most people in the boarding house have developed these types of networks to one degree or another. Peter, whose main concern in life at the present time is getting enough to drink, sees a doctor who is himself an alcoholic. This not only makes it easier to obtain drugs such as librium and valium, used with alcohol to reach a more effective high, or to reduce the effects of a bad hangover, but Peter can also approach the doctor for money to obtain alcohol. After all, the Doctor knows what it is like to need a drink. And Doug, who has been in and out of the Grace Hospital Emergency exit many times over the last few years, due mainly to a combination of alcohol, drugs and epilepsy, has come to know some of the nurses there. As a result he sometimes, usually during a midnight shift, goes there to visit. While there he will obtain a certain amount of cigarettes and usually a nurse will bring a tray of food from the kitchen. Networks are developed then by both conscious effort and by chance.

Such occurrences should not, however, create a romantic impression of boarding house life in which relations among boarders are harmonized to the needs of the group. Group solidarity is temporary, and ends when the need that brought the group together has been met. Much of the day - to - day interaction involves conflict, fighting, yelling, lying, backstabbing and stealing. Boarders recognize the boarding house as a "madhouse" and consider life in it a "kick in the ass". Much of the conflict revolves around the deprivation that is a constant condition of their lives. They are perennially in need of something - money, clothes, soap, toilet paper, tobacco, and a host of other everyday things. If an opportunity arises in which such needs can be met, boarders feel obliged to fill them. Stealing is one of the few ways open, and other boarders are the most readily available source of things to steal.

While most boarders express strong disapproval of it, stealing is an accepted part of boarding house life and any long-term boarder can expect to occasionally lose possessions this way. While he or she will curse the person who has taken them, he will also invariably curse himself for leaving himself open to a theft. Boarders realize that under such living conditions stealing is to be expected. Responsibility, therefore, is shared, and the person who has left possessions lying around in the open is considered as much at fault as the person who takes them. If someone is caught in the act he or she will be condemned, but once a theft has taken place there is little that the victim can do about it.

When someone is caught or accused of stealing, it can lead to verbal abuse or physical violence. The latter is more likely to occur if someone is caught red handed.

One afternoon Ray had been in the bathroom preparing himself for a meeting with his social worker. Upon finishing he went to his room to finish dressing. While putting away his washing instruments he noticed that he had forgotten his toothpaste, a serious loss indeed for someone on an income of less than \$18 a week. When he returned to the bathroom he met Peter leaving with the toothpaste. He called Peter a thief and demanded the return of the item. Peter defended himself saying he had bought the toothpaste earlier that morning and that Mike, his roommate would vouch for the fact. An argument followed, which developed into a little pushing and shoving. The quarrel ended when Peter hit Ray in the eye. Ray retreated to his room, missed his appointment with the social worker, and two days later moved to another boarding house.

Physical assault is not likely without direct evidence. One day Bill went out of his room for a few brief minutes. When he returned Bob, his roommate, was sitting on a chair by the window and the two dollars Bill had left on the mantelpiece were gone. Bill immediately started to accuse Bob of taking the money. Bob denied it, saying that he had just come in and hadn't seen any money. The shouting and cursing continued for a half hour or more, upsetting the whole house, and stopped only after some of the boarders intervened and asked them to be quiet. Colin came

upstairs and asked what was going on. When told, he asked Bob he had taken the money and Bob denied it. Colin turned to Bill with a shrug of his shoulders, saying that there was nothing that could be done and that Bill should have known better than to leave two dollars lying around. That was the end of the matter.

The major source of tension is conflict between those who drink and those who do not. While drinking is forbidden in the house, the rule is generally ignored by those who drink, especially in the winter time. Some boarders drink occasionally simply because there is little else to do, others are steadfast alcoholics. Drinking is made easier by the fact that Colin also drinks, but there is nonetheless an attempt to keep drinking secret. Drinkers will put their bottles under their coats when they enter the house or travel from one room to another, make sure room doors are closed, keep bottles under the bed, drink out of coke cans, and generally try to be as inconspicuous as possible. Invariably, however, after a few drinks the drinkers forget their precautions and it is not long before the others know about it. Generally, no one objects to the drinking as long as the drinkers do not disturb anyone else, but usually as the level of alcohol increases so does the level of noise. If the level of noise becomes too much other boarders will start to complain.

Very often those who complain will simply be told to shut up and they frequently do, for persistent complaining invites a direct confrontation. On one occasion a drinker kicked in the

door and beat up a person who would not stop complaining. Sometimes boarders will phone Sally at her other house to complain about other boarders who are drinking, but this leaves the complainer open to delayed reprisals, for when Sally gives warning to those involved the drinkers can usually find out who the culprit was. The chief source of information here is Colin, who controls the use of the house telephone, and is usually willing to tell the drinkers who has called in a complaint. The informer may not be dealt with at the time, but at some later date when the offending drinker is drunk again he may subject him to physical and verbal abuse.

This type of conflict causes a great deal of tension between drinkers and non-drinkers. Most non-drinkers at Sally's dislike the drinkers mainly because of the disruption and disturbances they cause, but they also live in fear or are at least wary of the drinkers quickness to react violently to confrontation.

Chapter 6

Boarders and Institutions.

Henry Sloan was born in Trinity Bay in 1949. He lived with his parents and went to the local school where he completed grade 10. Henry, it was said, had a terrible temper and during the last years with his parents he fought with friends, neighbours and family. It was after such a fight with his father that his parents had Henry committed to the Waterford Hospital, and he spent the next nine years there.

When he was released from the Hospital, Henry moved into a boarding house and received Social Assistance. He moved from one boarding house to another never staying in the same place for long. He has tried to return home on a number of occasions but his last attempt resulted in his parents placing him on a bond to stay away. He has not worked since his school days.

Henry, still unable to control his temper, is always getting into some kind of trouble because of it - mischief, damage to property, minor assault. In October 1983 he was sleeping in a back room of a downtown taxi stand. He had been living there since spring with little money. One day, frustrated and tired with his present living conditions, Henry left the stand, walked up to a policeman and punched him in the nose. He received seven months for assault causing bodily harm and served the time at Her



Majesty's Prison in St. John's. There he found more suitable living conditions.

Her Majesty's Penitentiary in St. John's is a medium security prison which holds close to two hundred male prisoners serving sentences of less than two years in duration. About ninety percent of the offenders are guilty of property violations such as break and entry, petty theft and fraud. Most offenders there were either drunk, unemployed or both when the crime was committed. In principle the prison was intended to restrict the freedom and social life of people who broke the rules of law which govern society. The individual was expected to adapt to the strict discipline and highly regulated life of the institution. Recently, however, emphasis has been placed on rehabilitation programs aimed at helping the individual overcome certain social problems and help them integrate successfully into society. These programs can range from an Alcoholic Anonymous meeting to help people overcome their drinking problems, or education to improve skills. Programs are usually voluntary and counselors are available to help choose the program best suited to the individual's needs (McNutt:1988:47-48).

There are three sections of accommodations in the penitentiary in St. John's. The old center block, built in 1859, holds 70 men in a number of 8' by 12' cells. Each cell holds two men and because there are no toilets a money bucket is used. In the new block, built in the 1940's, there are about 50 cells. These cells hold one prisoner each and come with toilet

and sink. There are also three segregation cells where prisoners are taken out of the general population for violation of conduct. Expansions are under way to provide accomodate for 68 more inmates (Wegenast, 1988:49-53).

For Henry the prison was a more comfortable place to live than his room at the back of the taxi stand. It offered a certain amount of recreation, such as a weight room, gymnasium, a carpentry shop, and a TV room. In addition there were three meals a day -- fish & chips, turkey, roast beef - meals that Henry had done without for some time.

Most boarders are not as deliberate as Henry. However, if you ask a long time boarder who has been to prison about how his experience there compared with his boarding house experience he will rarely have anything bad to say. Doug will for example talk about the good food and Sean will remember the time he enjoyed in the weight room. This does not mean that boarders go out en masse, break the law and deliberately get caught, although some like Henry do. But if getting caught and going to jail is unfortunate, it is no deterrent. The result is that many boarders will engage in illegal activities.

Sean, John and Bob had been walking up and down the streets of downtown St. John's for a good hour and the cold November morning was beginning to have its effect. Sean suggested that they go back to the house before they froze to death and John, who had already complained about the coldness, quickly agreed. They walked along Water Street as far as the liquor store, went

straight on up past New Gower and onto Crosbie. About a quarter of the way up the street, John stopped and pointed to a big brown two story house.

The house, with rotting clapboard and peeling paint, had been abandoned a couple of months before, and the windows had been covered with sheets of ply-wood. The front door had been pad-locked shut and stapled onto it was a notice from city hall that the house was to be torn down.

The men stood across from it for a while talking about the lack of housing. John felt that if he owned the house and had a bit of money he could repair it. The three agreed that it was too bad that the house had been boarded up and then headed back to their boarding house.

Later that afternoon the three were sitting around John's room and the boarded-up house again became the topic of conversation. This time John concentrated on the wasteful destruction of the house in another manner. Inside the house, he noted, was a certain amount of copper tubing, which would probably be taken to the city dump along with the rest of the garbage taken from the house. Copper tubing, he said, could be sold at one of the scrap metal dealers down on George Street. Within minutes the three men had decided to break into the house and steal whatever copper tubing that was there.

Later that night John, Bob and Sean made their way to the back of the condemned house. Sean and Bob grabbed hold of the

corner of a piece of ply-wood that covered a lower corner window and tipped it off. The glass was already missing from the window so they climbed inside. John had taken a hack-saw from the basement of Sally's and with it they set about taking the copper pipe from the house.

The next day they made their way down to George Street to the Newfoundland Scrap Metal depot. In all they got about seven or eight dollars for their effort, out of which they promptly bought a cheap bottle of wine and some cigarettes.

But this type of activity is more of an adventure than anything else and most boarders would not go to so much trouble for so little return. Shoplifting is the preferred method of illegally raising cash. Boarders steal from a number of different locations and choose goods that can be easily sold. Indeed, in one particular west end bar its possible to take orders for a variety of items - shoes, radios, meat, cigarettes, and just about anything else you would like. Sometimes boarders can enter into a relationship with their house operator where boarders will steal goods, in this case usually food, and sell it to the house operator. In this way the operator is able to buy cheap food and the boarders are able to pick up some pocket-money as well as control to a certain extent what they eat.

Shoplifting is usually an individual activity. Two or more boarders may enter a store together but if someone is caught it is that person alone who takes the blame. Individuals also have preferred locations and types of goods they like to steal. Bob,

for example, likes to steal steaks at a supermarket in the central part of town. John frequents the Arcade on a regular basis, partly, he says because he does not like the owner.

Sometimes, it seems, boarders will get together for a collective shoplifting effort. Robert related a story where he and two friends from another house entered a supermarket in the west end of the city to steal some steaks. As it happened an employee was at work at the meat section. Robert went over to where the person was working and stuffed a steak under his shirt. Of course the employee took notice and followed Robert as he made his way around the store. But while Robert was walking up and down the store aisle his friends were busy taking a large amount of steaks. When Robert noticed that his friends were going out the door he made his way back to the meat section and in full view of the employee returned the steak.

These types of activities are, of course, aimed at making life in a low income boarding house a little more bearable. However boarders are not always as direct in their approach. Boarders can, and very often do, manipulate people and institutions to suit their own needs. The institution most widely used by boarders in this house is the detoxification center, Talbot House.

Talbot House, according to a worker there, is named after the Irishman Matt Talbot, who was himself an alcoholic. Matt would work for a while, become unemployed and start drinking. While he was working he would share his money with his friends.

One day when he found himself out of work he asked his friends if they would buy him a beer. His friends said no, and from that day forward Matt Talbot dedicated himself to God, the church and sobriety. As a personal penance he would attend several masses a day.

There is only one Talbot House in Newfoundland but there are several in Ireland and on the mainland, and there is a Matt Talbot association in the United States. The concept of detoxification centers originated in the US during the mid-sixties. "The detoxification center was to replace the drunk tank; a place where the inebriate could receive human positive orientation care, as opposed to passive treatment and ridicule because of his particular lifestyle or illness" (Beck, 1983:15-18).

Talbot House is a twenty-four hour, all male unit that holds twenty-four people. It is operated as a division of St. Clare's Mercy Hospital with funding funneled in through the Alcohol and Drug Dependency Commission of Newfoundland and Labrador. There are between 250-300 admissions per month with an average daily stay of 3.7 days.<sup>12</sup> Admission criteria is intoxication or withdrawal from alcohol. The program has a number of different functions - to enable the individual to look at himself and his relation with alcohol, to give the individual the opportunity to discuss his problem with other residents and staff, and to give information about treatment resources. But the main function of

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<sup>12</sup> Personal Communique with Bruce Lucas, assistance director of Talbot House.

the center is the detoxification of the individual. This means allowing the individual time to rest, and the building up of body strength with good food, coffee and juices.

It is here we find the reason why many boarders use the center. There is little comparison between the food at the boarding house and the food at the center. On any given day the residents at the center can have a choice of a breakfast of bacon and eggs, bologna and eggs, and cereal and eggs. For lunch you might have roast beef, chicken or a pork chop dinner. Plus there is a clean bed, a television room, a games room, a bath and shower, and a friendly staff with plenty of cigarettes. A stay at Talbot House is for many boarders a necessary break away from the boarding house. Many boarders will tell you that they wouldn't go there if "I had a half decent place to live," or "if there was a decent flop house," or "if I was getting some decent meals down at the boarding house." The program at Talbot House is a means of obtaining these things. But because of the admission criteria which states that you must be drinking or withdrawing from alcohol, the program often has the opposite effect of what is originally intended. Boarders, some who would not usually drink, will drink in order to obtain the benefits the program offers. Even those who work there realize that this is a problem. As Bruce Lucas, assistant director of the house points out;

of course there are people who know that they have to be drinking to get in so they'll just go out and have their few beers just to get in. Its counterproductive. Here we are trying to help people get sober and at the same time they go out and get drunk just to get in.

Buts thats it, thats the way it is.

Talbot House does have its successes. Some people have given up drinking because of its existence. And many alcoholics would not survive without the food and non-alcoholic drinks, the process of detoxification, offered by the center. However the center has also been integrated into the economy of the low-income boarders. And even boarding house operators have been known to use it.

One day after a particularly heavy bout of drinking and using drugs Bob had a epileptic attack in the hallway outside the kitchen. As is usually the case the whole house was thrown into turmoil with Sally standing over Bob screaming for someone to phone the police. Colin, following Sally's request, did just that and the police arrived a couple of minutes later. The police asked if Bob had been drinking and Sean noted that he had been drinking as well as taking some drugs. The police then took Bob to the hospital where he had his stomach pumped out. A couple of hours later, when he had recovered from the attack, the police dropped Bob back to the boarding house. But Sally refused to let him back, saying that he had caused enough trouble for the day. She insisted that that police take Bob to the Detox center where he could get a couple of days rest and "straighten himself out a bit." Only then would she allow him back into the house.

But while the detox center can be used by a wide range of people the use of certain institutions are limited. Individual circumstances sometimes dictates who can and can not use an



institution. Sean's major network involved a couple of friends that he had met in prison. They had been placed in the John Howard Society Halfway House.

The house, which acts as a transitional point for former inmates of her Majesty's Prison, has been operating in St. John's for about nine years. The objective of the halfway house is to help ex-inmates integrate back into society. To obtain entrance into the house a person has to either apply for parole or a temporary leave of absence to the house, or if on probation have someone, usually a probation officer, sponsor him (Carlson, 1984:41-42). The center offers twenty-four hour supervision and has full-time counsellors who help with individual problems, such as the development of life skills. The counsellors are also in close contact with the Canada Employment Center and together, with the help of Canada Works and Canada Community Development, they try and find jobs for the residents. These jobs are usually low-paying and short-term but the counsellors feel that it will give their clients some practical experience as well as enough working time to collect unemployment insurance benefits. The main orientation, then, is towards job training, as it is believed that this is the most productive way to integrate ex-offenders back into mainstream society. As Gordon Bulter, counselor with the Howard House puts it;

Most of the people who go to prison for breaking and entering are low skilled people. Also, they are usually from the lower classes. The average educational level is around grade eight. If the people now living in Howard could have found employment most

probably wouldn't be here now. All they really need is some full-time work, something secure.<sup>13</sup>

The belief that employment is the key to keeping many people out of prison seems to be well founded. The recidivism rate for people who find employment after serving their term is much lower than for those who remain unemployed after leaving prison (Carlson, 1974:113). Indeed Butler wonders why, when the cost of maintaining a prisoner for one year is so high (\$69 a day or \$21,986 a year) more money isn't put into employment projects. This he believes would be more productive.

For Sean, however, the Howard House was not a place to reform, nor a place where he could integrate himself back into society. Rather it was a place to be used in order to meet the needs of his present existence. By visiting his friends at Howard House he was able to make his life in the low-income boarding house easier. The Howard House became a supplement to his income. It was also a source of entertainment, something lacking in the boarding house environment. He was able to watch television, play ping-pong, shoot pool or lift weights. And if he happened to be around during supper time, which he usually was, he would be fed. The activities and the food, an important part of the integration process in the halfway house program, were now part of the economy of a low income boarder. The program became part of Sean's network filling a void present in the boarding house environment, an environment created in large part by the general society.

<sup>13</sup> Personal Communique

## Chapter 7

### Conclusion

Most anthropologists would agree that the group under study could be located in the category of the underclass. But the word 'underclass' is a rather vague term. The nebulous nature of its meaning stems in large part from the differences in the people under study. As Ken Auletta points out, drug-users, pimps, prostitutes, career criminals, gamblers, peddlers of hot goods, alcoholics, welfare recipients, derelicts, shopping bag ladies, sadistic slashers, are all considered part of the underclass (Auletta, 1982:43-44, Anderson, 1961:61-106). As members of the underclass they often participate in what is considered deviant behavior, or behavior not in keeping with the social norms of society (Auletta, 1982:26), and when these people interact with each other they are said to form a sub-group of society (Becker, 1963:81).

Auletta also notes that some social scientists blame society for the existence of the underclass and often cite the inability of the economic structure to provide employment as the reason for its existence (Auletta, 1982:31, Spradley, 1970:2). Unemployment and low job status force people to act differently in order to survive (Clark, 1965:47, Schultz, 1969:193).

Others tend to see the existence of the underclass as a

behavioral problem. Much, for example has been written about alcohol and the condition of alcoholism. Under this condition "inebriety functions as a mechanism for securing need gratification...generated by the inability of a person to perform secondary roles"(Pittman & Gordon,1953:11). The inability of people to interact under normal conditions is said to be a process of undersocialization. Undersocialization means that individuals have had limited participation in normal primary groups such as kinship or job associations(Pittman & Gordon,1953:11). Limited participation can occur, for example, because of unemployment, a national crisis such as a war, or because people are institutionalized because of a mental or physical handicap(Wallace,1956:165).

Thus the underclass can include those sub-groups who live on the periphery of society. They are there either because of some deviant behavioral problem or because of a weakening of the social and economic fabric of society.

The present research would indicate that neither argument is exclusive to itself. Low income boarders are, without a doubt, among the poorest people in St. John's. They come from all parts of the province and are in their present position for different reasons. Some are alcoholics who have drunk themselves down the social ladder. Others are old and have no family and little money. Many have a physical or mental handicap and are unable to participate successfully in productive work. Many are people without occupational skills whose labour is not required by the

society. There are a few marginal workers, but for the most part the people who live in the boarding houses cannot or do not want to sell their labour in the market-place.

The large majority of the boarders are therefore outside the normal relations of production. They live in a limited domain where the social relations of a capitalist society are distorted but still recognizable. Since they own no wealth and do not or cannot sell their labour, the state provides for their support, mostly through cash allowances. In a sense then, they are paid for their physical and mental handicaps, their inability to find employment, or their alcoholism or drug addiction.

The amounts they receive, however, are not sufficient to maintain even the most minimal standards of what is regarded as normal life in the city. The only living accommodation available to them is so far below the normal standards of society that according to St. John's city by-laws, many of the places where they live are not supposed to exist at all. On the other hand, the Department of Social Services, which is charged with the responsibility of supporting them, cooperates with the owners and operators of the substandard accommodations. Thus the city government defines their environment as illegal, while the provincial government finances their illegal existence.

The money that is paid to the boarders is cycled back into the mainstream economy by marginal entrepreneurs like Sally and Joe, who collect it either from the boarders themselves, or directly from the Department of Social Services and pass it on to

the owner of the house; the supermarkets, the oil companies, the telephone company and the electricity company. When the system fails to provide even the bare minimum of support, other agencies, both publicly and privately funded, provide short-term services to fill the gap. Thus, the boarders, the boarding house owners and keepers, the civil servants of the Department of Social Services, and the staff of the service agencies are all linked in a set of social relations that operate to maintain the system. People do not actually die of starvation in the street, and the collective societal conscience is clear.

The boarders are considered, by ex-friends, relatives and society in general, as losers. They are considered weak, under-skilled, and lacking in proper behavior, and they are largely excluded from the patterns of social relationship of the mainstream society. They therefore must construct their social lives within the boundaries of the marginal world the society has created for them.

There has been some debate as to the nature of this construction. / Some have argued that the social networks of the underclass are atomistic and instrumental (Stephens, 1967:14-17), with the economic activities serving individual interests (Zorbaugh, 1963:177, Rodman, 1969:160). (Individuals enter into and develop relationships which help benefit the individuals (Liebow, 1967:162).

Others have argued that the social structure of the underclass is much more organized. Processes of enculturation

and acculturation gives rise to systems of organization (Lewis, 1966:69, Seigal, 1978:189, Whyte, 1981:268). Interpersonal relationships develop out of which comes interdependence and obligation (Seigal, 1978:157), allowing individuals to meet certain needs and allowing for the group's survival (Stack, 1974:98).

In St. John's the money the boarders receive is inadequate to meet their day-to-day needs beyond the barest minimum. To make life a little more bearable boarders must take action and develop relationships intended to extend the resources available to them. Among themselves these relationships are almost always atomistic and instrumental. Boarders seldom have a solid network from which to work. This is partly due to the rapid turnover in boarding house populations, and the changing day-to-day needs. Boarders cannot depend too strongly on someone who might be there one day but gone the next. And since their needs are mostly immediate, boarders must have some knowledge as to who might best help fill them at any particular time. This knowledge is most readily available within the confines of the house.

Boarders have many needs and develop patterns of exchange to help to fill them. Boarders will share with each other or engage in co-operative activities. They might, like John, Sean, Robert and Tee, pool their knowledge of street life in order to obtain enough food to eat, or an alcoholic might share his drugs with someone in the hope of later receiving some alcohol. People who have similar needs are most likely to engage in this sort of

reciprocity.

Relationship such as these also help legitimize the action of the boarders. Boarders often act against traditional social norms. Exchange relations help identify common problems, and common problems can be given a social rather than a purely individual definition. Thus an individual's action is legitimized by the social group. Even when they are legitimized by the group, however, many activities in the boarding house are individual in nature. People who walk the streets looking for bottles or scrap metal will usually travel alone. There is really no need for help and the pickings are usually slim. Boarders who participate in an illegal activity such as shoplifting usually do so alone. Some of what they steal may be for their own use, such as cigarettes and some food items, but much of what is available to be stolen must be exchanged for money or something else that will meet the shoplifter's immediate needs. —Boarders who participate in shoplifting on a regular basis often develop a network of people to whom they can sell, although a boarders who has, for example, stolen a dozen T-bone steaks, will often enter a west end bar or tavern and sell the steaks table to table. In any event the individual activity of shoplifting frequently requires the development of social relationships to make it profitable to the shoplifter.

Of course not all such activities are individual in nature. A couple of boarders might, for example, hang out on a street corner and take turns panhandling people who pass by. Crimes



such as breaking and entering usually involve more than one person. Patterns of sharing may bring together the product of both illegal and legitimate activities, such as scavenging. For example, one boarder might steal a carton of cigarettes, while another has a bottle of wine, bought from the sale of a car battery. Together they are both able to drink and smoke.

Although boarders at Sally's sometimes, while trying to meet certain needs, develop relationships which help fulfill those needs, the fulfilling of individual needs can also bring them into conflict with each other. There is little or no group solidarity. Their struggle to survive does not allow it. Boarders know full well they cannot count too strongly on support from other boarders. Each knows that the other has few resources to share and ultimately it is up to the individual boarder to look after him/herself (Liebow, 1967:217). Boarders have many needs in common, but there are not enough resources to fill the needs of all. Thus fulfilling a need is often completed at someone else's expense, and boarders will steal from each other, causing someone else to do without.

But conflict within the group stems from more than just the fulfilling of individual needs, it also has to do with individuality. People experience their lives differently and these differences give rise to differences of opinions, emotions, likes and dislikes, activities such as drinking or sitting on the edge of one's bed and losing one's mind in a crack in the wall. Living in a boarding house is more than just a shared economic

experience - it is also an individual experience.

The main source of conflict within the house is between the drinkers and the non-drinkers. As I have pointed out the drinkers will often interfere with the quiet apathy of the non-drinkers who in turn disturb the drinking patterns of those who drink. But the conflict also reflects the structural differences within the house. Unlike traditional society where excessive drinking has its financial and social cost, excessive drinking at Sally's boarding house can bring social and financial rewards. Drinking can, for example, earn you a late night supper at Colin's apartment where you can relax in front of a color television. And because Sally, Joe and Colin are alcoholics they share a certain affiliation with those who drink. Thus Sally will often ignore complaints from non-drinking boarders who have been victimized by a drunk.<sup>14</sup>

While boarders often come into conflict with the general population of St. John's, they still share many of the traditional beliefs and attitudes of this urban society. When Tee, for example, describes work as an activity where life-long friends as well as money are made, he is describing what he believes should be the central focus in a person's life. When Peter complains about his lack of family relations he is

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<sup>14</sup> This type of structure cannot be generalized to include all boarding houses. Many boarding house operators will refuse to keep boarders who engage in heavy bouts of drinking. We can, however, note that traditional norms sometimes lose their value in boarding house society.

recognizing the importance of the family to an individual's life experience. Or when boarders gather to discuss Canada's hockey victory over the USSR it is easy to see the pride they feel for their country. The boarders in general appear to believe in family, country, the work ethic, the rule of law, religion and other institutions which help maintain society, but because of their position in society, because of who they are, they do without many of the benefits which are supposed to come with such beliefs. Dominant ideologies are believed in, but are of little use when it comes to fulfilling day to day needs. Because of the physical conditions of their existence, the getting by on less than ten dollars a week, the poor meals, and abominable living conditions, it sometimes becomes necessary to reinterpret the institutions and ideology of dominant society (Wallace, 1965:56-59, Brody, 1971:71-76).

Thus, for example, Her Majesty's Prison takes on a new meaning if seen from the point of view of the boarders. Intended to be a place of punishment and integration, it becomes a haven. Many boarders are confined, because of a lack of resources, to the immediate area of the house, so the confinement of prison is not perceived as much of a punishment. Looking forward to a little time in prison they will often break the law in order to enjoy a few luxuries and a change of scene. But even the restricted life of a boarding house must have some value because breaking the law to be caught is not a common strategy.

Society's institutions, in this case the prison in St.

John's, are based on certain values and beliefs. It is hoped that people who go through the institutions will be reformed. The prison is intended to deter people from breaking the law. For boarders, however, it is a part of the structure of their economic system.

Talbot House can be viewed in the same manner. It exists in order to promote the value of sobriety or the correct use of alcohol. Many people, however, will drink to excess in order to take advantage of the food, the clean accommodations and the relaxed atmosphere offered by the program. The values and norms that Talbot House is trying to promote are of little value to the boarders. For them it is more rewarding to break the norms, redefining Talbot House to their norms, where a good drunk is a desired goal. The double twist of their strategy is that it is recognized by the counsellors as well. They know full well that boarders use Talbot House for their own purposes and it often calls into question the meaningfulness of their part in society's rehabilitation program. One long-time worker at Talbot House notes that when people start working at the Center they are very enthusiastic about the prospects of helping the individual alcoholic. They quickly become disillusioned, realizing that many of their clients are not serious about being reformed, and that reform is for the most part out of the question. Even if a client is serious about giving up the drink he will usually leave Talbot House and go back to the social environment from which he came. Under these conditions it is only a matter of time before the client starts drinking again. And the chances are he will

deliberately get drunk in order to take advantage of the clean bed, and good food offered by Talbot House. So, when the counsellors at Talbot House throw their hands up in frustration, it is not the boarders they are annoyed with, but their inability, under the present social and economic structure, to do their job.

For their part boarders often come back from a stay at Talbot House joking about how good the food was and how comfortable the beds were. Sometimes they will curse a counsellor for being a nuisance, which usually means he was trying to do his job. For example, Robert came back to the house complaining about a counselor. "Where would they be" he asked, "without us?" He answered his own question stating, "Probably be out of a job."

Of course what Robert is doing is expressing his particular view of the relationship between the counsellors and himself. The boarder's marginal world requires for its support a set of "legitimate" structures that bring rewards to the people who take part - civil servants, social workers, police, etc. In this case a counsellor at Talbot House receives a reward because Robert has a drinking problem. Robert recognizes the counsellor's dependency on his social problem.

For their part counsellors feel alienation and frustration from the contradiction on which the relationship is based; counsellors realize the futility of trying to do their jobs under the present economic circumstances, but at the same time depend

upon the structure for their jobs. They also recognize that while they may not be achieving the desired goal of the institution, they are providing some easing of the harsh life of their clients. The paradox and the contradiction, of course, is that in doing so they perpetuate the system.

This contradiction is found in many of the structures of "legitimate" society. The priests and nuns who give money or food, the social worker who bends the rules to get a few extra dollars for somebody, do so out of a humanitarian desire to make boarder's lives a little easier. But in doing so the social problem of poverty is hidden behind a wall of humanitarianism and the structural problems are ignored.

In constructing their social life boarders develop relationships aimed at fulfilling day-to-day needs. In doing so boarders create their own world view in which they share a common moral and intellectual awareness. On the surface their day-to-day life activities may seem disorganized, but these activities are organized around this common moral and intellectual awareness.

Boarders receive economic rewards from these relations, and they become dependent upon them, but they also come to depend on the ideology around which the relationships are organized. Thus boarders are not only dominated economically, but they are also dominated ideologically. A boarder may gain some meager economic reward by stealing, but he remains a thief in the eyes of the person who buys the item, and if caught will go to jail. A

boarder may use Talbot House for his own reasons, but he must be seen to be an alcoholic in order to do so. Social problems such as shoplifting and alcoholism are addressed with new and stricter laws and more Talbot Houses. We are given more of the same while some root causes, such as unemployment and poverty in general, are ignored. And because boarders are still influenced by the dominant beliefs of society, that stealing is wrong and excess drinking is socially unacceptable, their dependency also contributes to feelings of low self-esteem, alienation and a loss of dignity.

The social life boarders develop while living in illegally operated boarding houses in St. John's is in large part an expression of the condition under which they live. They are excluded from the socio-economic relations of work, and are lacking in social support structures such as ties of kinship or friendship. Their struggle against economic oppression leads them to behavior not in keeping with the common morality of society, but it is a response to the social structure, the way they cope with poverty.

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